

NIKOS PSILAKIS

# BYZANTINE CHURCHES AND MONASTERIES OF CRETE

A complete guide to the  
sacred places of Crete  
with an attached map for each route



«KARMANOR»





NIKOS PSILAKIS

MONASTERIES  
AND BYZANTINE CHURCHES  
OF CRETE

KARMANOR

## Monasteries and Byzantine Memories of Crete

A guide to the monasteries and  
the religious memories of the island

### Photography:

Nikos Psilakis

*A small number of photos have been taken by  
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Lophos Semeli

71500 Heraklion

Crete, Greece

Tel. No: 2810-261920

e-mail: npsilakis@otenet.gr

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## INTRODUCTION

*This book, which is the outcome of the research efforts of the author on the monasterial history of Crete, provides the reader with all necessary information which will help him become familiar with the Byzantine memories of the island. It begins with an extensive introduction to the historical situation of Crete during the Byzantine period, gives a brief outline of the history of the island and concludes by suggesting specific trips to the countryside. It includes all the active historical monasteries, along with a great number of inactive ones, which are of general interest, though. Moreover, it includes information about visits to museums and frescoed churches. The frescoed churches of Crete are actually more than 800; it is, therefore, impossible to visit them all. For this reason, the author has selected those that can be visited, are combined with other Byzantine and Post-Byzantine monuments and offer the visitor a representative picture of the Cretan School of painting. You can select one or more of the 16 suggested trips and mark your route on the map attached at the end of the book. The place-names and the names of the towns or the villages on the map have been written -for technical reasons- in Latin characters.*

*The visitor to the Cretan churches should address to the priest of the village each church belongs to, as they may be locked.*

*The monasteries remain open from sunrise to sunset. However, they are usually closed at noon, from 13.00 to 15.00. The visitor should respect the place, the monastic community and the special rules of the monastery's function. The entry to most of the monasteries is forbidden to visitors who are not properly dressed.*

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# THE RELIGIOUS TRADITION OF CRETE

*From Cretan Zeus' birth to Apostle Paul's mission  
and the prevalence of the Christian religion.*

Long before the Christian religion was widespread, Crete had constituted an example of unique and remarkable importance for the religious life and customs of worship in the ancient world. Zeus, the mightiest of gods, was born in a cave on a Cretan mountain, where the Kouretes protected him from the paternal curse and a goat, Amalthea, nursed him with her milk. That cave turned out to be one of the most renowned sanctuaries of ancient times where pilgrims from the Mediterranean countries congregated... An ancient myth reports that Europa, the maid that gave her name to a whole continent, set out from Crete, where, under a plane-tree, she had experienced Zeus' love. Europa became the first queen of Crete and the ancient people used to show an evergreen plane-tree at Gortys saying that under its plentiful foliage Zeus had slept with the beautiful maid. Moreover, Cretans' tendency to become priests in the service of gods is known from ancient texts. The first priests of Apollo in his famous sanctuary at Delphi were Cretans.

Mythology, combined with the weighty position of Crete as the geographic and religious center of antiquity, as well as with the Cretans' inclination to priesthood, created a deep religious tradition that was to be carried on during the years to come. As the Christian religion kept on spreading, Crete became a religious center with thousands of worshippers ascending to the top of Psiloreitis in order to pay their reverence to the cave where, according to the myth, Zeus was born. However, in some parts of the island the new religion had been preached in the very early

years of its emergence by the Apostle Paul himself. During one of his missions to Crete he left behind him his friend and follower, the Apostle Titus. Titus is regarded as the first founder of the Cretan Church and, to honour him, the Cretans erected a magnificent church at Gortys, the capital of Roman Crete. That church is one of the most important Christian monuments on the island. The Apostle Paul, was -and still is- worshipped in Crete and there exist a lot of churches and a considerable number of monasteries dedicated to him. There are similarly a lot of traditions reporting that Apostle Paul passed through various parts of the island.

The connection of Crete with the great Byzantine Empire dates back to the 4th century and has been very dramatic, incidental and tempestuous. The Arab rule in the Mediterranean caused many problems and disturbance to the tranquil life of the island with frequent raids inflicted before the 9th century. In 828 Crete was cut off from the main body of the Byzantine Empire. It was captured by the Saracens and was occupied by them till 961, when Nicephorus Phocas, general and later emperor of Byzantium, liberated it. The second Byzantine period commenced in 961 and ended in 1204. In the wake of the fourth Crusade, Crete became the possession of the Genoese head pirate Enrico Pescatore, who sold it to the Venetians, the great power of the time. The Venetians remained on the island as conquerors until 1645/1669, when the Ottoman Turks captured it. The dark period of the Turkish occupation lasted till 1898. Then Crete became a semi-



autonomous state under the name of "the Cretan State" and only in 1913 was it united with Greece.

The fact that the inhabitants of Crete developed a pure martial spirit was of unique importance, because they knew that only with strong fights could they gain their freedom. The revolts against the Venetians first and against the Turks later were frequent and tense. Some of them have been recorded in World History as examples of self-sacrifice and dignity.

### **THE FIRST BYZANTINE ERA (330-824 A. D.)**

In the course of the first Byzantine era, Crete was a province (thema) of the great Byzantine Empire and combined the old administrative institutions, preserved from the time of Roman Occupation, with the new administrative structures prevailing throughout the Byzantine Empire. Gortys was the capital of the "thema" of Crete, a big town in the southern part of the island, ruined today. Among its remains there is considerable evidence of the prosperity of the island during that time. The present-day visitor can admire the remains of St Titus' church, dating from the sixth century, and the ruins of early Christian basilicas in the SE corner of the citadel of the town, at Mavropata (off the main road Aghii Deca - Mitropolis, among the centuries-old olive trees), at Pythian Apollo's temple, which was converted into a Christian church and elsewhere.

Historians agree that Crete of the first Byzantine era led a peaceful and prosperous life, having nevertheless lost the leading role of the past. It had fallen into historic oblivion, whereas its population went in for peaceful works. The tranquility was disturbed towards the end of that period, when the Arab pirate raids commenced, which caused serious problems to that insular Byzantine province. Finally, at the outset of the 9th century, the Saracens captured Crete and established a special type of pirate state.

The knowledge about the art of the Byzantine era is little, if not scanty. The archaeological finds, however, prove that the Cretans lived a deeply religious life. Remnants

of 70 early-Christian basilicas have been traced throughout the island. Some of them are of extreme interest and among the ruins the visitor can admire their entire edificial substructure, the mosaic floorings or the architecture of the churches.

Typical examples of basilicas exist at Itanos (near the palm-tree forest of Vai, where there are remains of three basilicas), at the harbour of Siteia, at Elounda (two), at Malia, at Chersonisos, at Piscopiano close to Chersonisos, at Knossos, Lyktos (an ancient town in the area of the villages Xithas, Aski and Kastamonitsa), Lassaiia (near Kali Limenes), Lendas, Gortys, Syvritos (Vyzari and Thronos in Amari -at the site of Marmara), Panormon in the province of Mylopotamon, Arghyroupolis, Goutheliana, Viran Episcopi, Frangocastellon, Aghia Roumeli (at the exit of the Samaria Gorge), Soughia, Episcopi (Rotonda) in the province of Kissamos, Aghia, Almyritha in the province of Apokoronas and elsewhere. Most of them, the most significant ones, are situated on the coast and give us a clear picture of Crete of the early-Christian and Byzantine years. The coast was densely inhabited, consequently there was no fear of piratical raids.

Basilicas were large rectangular buildings, the interior of which was divided into three aisles with colonades. This style is an evolution of the architectural and aesthetic perception of late antiquity. The early basilicas were not simple churches, as considered today, that is they were not merely places of worship but also places for religious gatherings. Hence they had the required building structure. Near the basilica there was a group of buildings, as customary in the ancient sanctuaries, which preceded the early-Christian buildings. The main sacred areas had their own special lay out: The first room one came upon was the peristyle. It was the place where the faithful prepared themselves before entering the narthex, that is the room of the catechumens. Past the narthex was the main body of the church and to the east of it was the sanctuary, where only priests were allowed to enter. The sections of the basilica followed a horizontal axis directing from east to west.

Regarding the painting tradition of the first

Byzantine period of Crete, one can see the non-pictorial decoration of St Nikolaos' church at Kastelli in the province of Merabello (in the town of Aghios Nikolaos). This decoration includes squares which enclose crosses, triangles with leaf decorations and other motifs.

### SAINT TITUS' CATHEDRAL

St Titus' cathedral at Gortys is the most important example of cathedral of the first Byzantine era still extant on Crete. It was erected around the middle of that period, in the course of the 6th century, and the changes in the Byzantine architectural style are obvious. It is a triple-aisled domed church, built with special diligence, thus indicating how important it actually was. Although it is a typical church of that time, still it has quite a number of particularities. Pieces of marbles and crosses had been found on the floor of the church, which were enshrined in the walls during one of its restorations. At the southern side a pit was found with sacred vessels, sanctuary lamps and other items, which are kept today in the Historical Museum of Crete in Heraklion.

It is a splendid church where, as tradition has it, St Titus' skull had been kept, the Apostle who preached at Gortys and was the main organizer of the Cretan Church. Tradition reports that St Titus had been buried inside the church. It is certain that his skull



1. Ruins of a pre-Christian basilica at the harbour of Chersonisos. The mosaic floor.

2,3. The ruins of St Titus' basilica at the archaeological site of Gortys.





had remained there till the second Byzantine period, when the administrative center of Crete was shifted. The skull was then transferred to Chandax (present-day Heraklion) but, because of the Turkish assault and the long siege of Chandax, it was carried to Venice and only in 1966 was it taken back to Crete. For several centuries St Titus' was a metropolitan church where prominent Cretan hierarchs officiated.

### **ARAB RULE (828 - 961)**

The tranquil historical course of Byzantine Crete was violently interrupted when it was captured by the Saracens who had come from Gordova, Spain, under the leadership of Abu Hafs Omar. They were a large group of pirates desperately searching for a place to settle in the Eastern Mediterranean in the opening of the 9th century. They conquered Crete after having failed to settle in Egypt. The local tradition never forgot the assault of the Saracens. It reports that after they had disembarked they burnt their ships so that they couldn't leave, as the island was an ideal place to settle and, besides, the land was fertile. These traditions simply convey the terror of the local population inspired by that terrible event and have nothing to do with the historical truth. Another popular tradition

lends devilish properties to the Saracens.

It is a fact that this period is one of the most obscure in Cretan history. The Byzantine civilization was overcast, the towns decayed and Chandax, a new urban center, was founded, which became the center of the piratical raids in the Mediterranean. In this town they compiled the spoils they collected from their piratical assaults, which were a real scourge and terror for the Byzantines. In older years, historians believed that the Arabs had forced the Cretans to embrace Islamism and that there were demographic distortions on the island. Recent research, though, has proved that there has been neither ethnological alteration and distortion nor mass islamization.

Byzantium made repeated attempts to get Crete back. Nicephorus Phocas, the later emperor, managed to reunite Crete with the Byzantine Empire in 961, after a hard and bloody struggle. Scarcely anything has remained on Crete from the period of the Arab rule. The first walls of Chandax were then constructed, traces of which (as restored in later years) can be seen between Daedalus street and Dikaosinis avenue. In many parts of the town, and especially near the harbour, Arabic coins and fragments of vessels of the time, buried in the ground, come to surface from time to time. A few samples are kept in the Historical Museum of Crete.

## SECOND BYZANTINE PERIOD (961-1204)

The conquest of Crete by the Byzantine General Nicephorus Phocas was an event of unique historical and cultural significance. The Byzantines celebrated the liberation of the island with special sumptuousness. The Saracens' spoils gave wealth to the Byzantine state. The pious General Nicephorus Phocas donated part of the Arabic treasures to his friend, Monk Athanasios the Athonite. With those treasures Athanasios built the important monastery of Meghisti Lavra (Major Hermitage) on Mount Athos (Holy Mountain).

The return of Crete back to the Byzantine world brought a new wind of prosperity and cultural development to the island. In the second Byzantine period Crete followed the Byzantine way of life at a brisk pace. One can imagine today how the Cretans felt, when, one morning in 961, they woke up and found themselves in a different, completely unknown, world. The former generation that recalled the Byzantine domination (that before 824) had gone and the following generations lived entirely cut off from the rest of the world, isolated on an island which led a life with different customs and manners from those that had prevailed till then. Crete, therefore, woke up into an unknown world, although we are not aware of the living conditions of the time. The Byzantines had to eradicate all those elements that had remained on the island from the time of the Arab occupation. They organized the defence of the Mediterranean with fortification works and made it a point to fortify the region of the Eastern Mediterranean in order to dissuade a new possible Arabic assault. They also organized a new administrative system according to the Byzantine patterns. Crete became a "thema" again, that is an eparchy, a province of the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantines saw to invigorate the nationalist and religious morale of the population. Bishoprics were established again and a



4. Gortys. St Titus' cathedral.  
5. Nicephorus Phocas.  
Modern sculpture kept in the  
Historical Museum of Crete  
in Heraklion.

big cathedral dedicated to the Apostle Titus was erected in Chandax, which was the capital of the island at the time. Into this cathedral St Titus' skull was transferred, which up to that time had been kept in the beautiful old cathedral at Gortys. Soon after 961 great church personalities preached in Crete. Among them were Nikon the Repenter and Ioannis Xenos (the Stranger) or Hermit from the village of Sivas in Messara. Information about the action of the former is scanty. On the other hand, it is very well known from historical sources that Ioannis Xenos was a significant church personality. He founded a number of monasteries and installed monks in them. A characteristic example is the church of Zoothochos Pigghi (Life-giving Source) between the villages of Alikianos and Kouphos in the province of Cydonia, which has been restored, as well as St Paul's church in the province of Sfakia. His most significant work was the monastery of Myriokephala on the western part of the district of Rethymnon, a monastery which experienced periods of prosperity but remains devastated today and its church is used as parochial. The visitor to the monastery of Myriokephala can see some of the oldest preserved frescoes on Crete. This monastery had been active for many centuries but, to all appearances, it was destroyed by the Ottoman Turks after 1646.

Other works of Ioannis Xenos or Hermit are St Eutykhios and Eutychianos' church close to Hodeghitria Monastery in Messara and, as we have proved, the old monastery of Flandra, which is situated just next to the palace of Phaestos. (There is no archaeological evidence in support of this fact, as the now surviving church is of the late years of the Venetian rule;



the only evidence is derived from historical sources).

Nevertheless, it's worth visiting the small beautiful church of Saint Paul on the beach near Aghia Roumeli, which is considered to be work of Ioannis Xenos. The present tradition claims that the church was built there in memory of St Paul's visit to the area. There is no access to the church by transportation. In order to visit it one has to go by boat from Sfakia to Aghia Roumeli and whence to walk eastwards for about one and a half hour. The landscape compensates for the fatigue of the walk. The 10th-11th century church stands up against time although the waves have been lashing it for almost a thousand years.

After the reconquest of Crete by the Byzantines there occurred significant changes in art. The cultural contact with Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, brought fresh air to the island. The attempt to imitate the trends prevailing in other Byzantine regions was not always successful. The Cretan artists, who for nearly one and a half century had been cut off from Byzantium and had no chance of getting information about the developments and the latest currents, had to try to adjust after 961. A typical example is that of the wall decoration of the Virgin's church in the monastery of Myriocephala, which was erected by Ioannis Xenos. The oldest wall paintings of the church are of the early years of the 11th century and are characterized as "provincial imitations of the artistic currents of that time". Whether painters from Constantinople came to Crete immediately after 961 is not known. It seems, however, that the Cretan artists were able to follow the artistic trends of Byzantium very early. Marvellous monuments and lots of frescoed churches dating from the 12th century have been preserved.

The ecclesiastical art provides a clear picture of that time. The Cretans' life was deeply religious, as it was common throughout the whole Byzantine Empire. The monks undertook the expenses of painting a large number of churches, while the erection of churches flourished. A great number of monasteries were founded on Crete during that time, which were preserved over the following years.

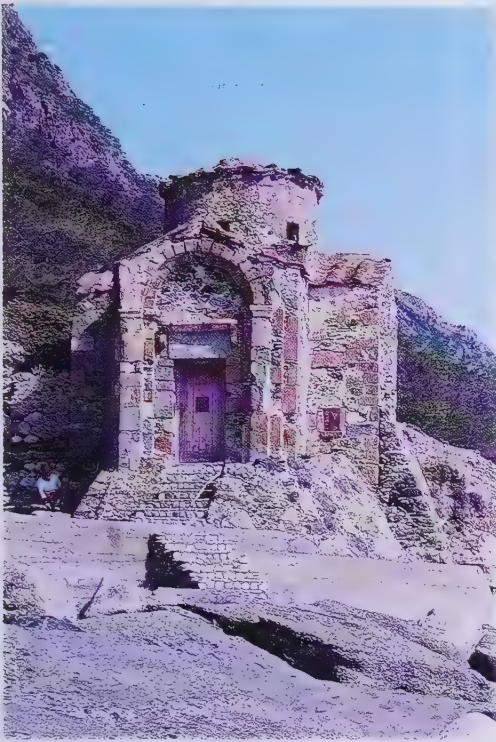


## VENETIAN RULE (1204/1211-1645/1669)

In 1204 there was a great turbulence in the Eastern Mediterranean. The crusaders of the 4th crusade caused a crack to the Byzantine Empire. In fact they managed to break it up. Agreements drawn between the crusaders and the Byzantine Empire, assigned Crete to Boniface the Momferat. However, the Genoese head pirate Enrico Pescatore hastened to occupy the island in 1206. A few years later Crete was transformed into a vast battle field between the Venetians and the Genoese. The former managed to prevail in 1211 and establish their dominion.

The domination of the Venetians turned a new leaf in the history of Crete. The new conquerors had to confront a hostile population, since the inhabitants of the island fervently wanted the reunion with the Byzantine Empire. The Venetians coped with the hostile disposition of the Cretans by establishing colonists on the island. More and more colonizers were sent there from Venice after 1212. The Venetian government lavishly granted privileges and large estates to attract as many settlers as possible to make the Venetians' presence on the island very powerful. The military presence of the new conquerors was strong and became even stronger with the organization of well prepared army and the construction of fortifications.

As mentioned above, the Cretans never ceased considering themselves Byzantines and looking to Constantinople. Apart from cultural evidence, this fact has also been proven by the successive revolutions of the subjugated, that shook the island during the first two centuries of the Venetian rule. The revolts started soon after 1211 and converted Crete into a battle field. The Byzantines supported those movements. In 1262 they sent off troops, but not enough to alter the state of things on the



6. Saint John the Stranger or Hermit. (Ai kyr Yiannis' church at Tsourouniana, Kissamos).
7. St George's church, the main church of an old monastery (Falandra) at Phaestos. The original monastery was founded by Aghios Ioannis Xenos.
8. St Paul's church at Aghia Roumeli, Sfakia.
9. Wall painting from the monastery of Myriokephala, Rethymnon.



island. In 1262 they prompted the Cretans to revolt, yet they didn't send the military assistance they had promised. The great revolutions burst out in 1272 and went on until the middle of the following century. Uprisings took place throughout the following centuries, too. In 1453 the Byzantine Empire was definitely dissolved by the Turks. Many refugees arrived in Crete then, who sought their connection with the Byzantine and Greek civilization on this island. Shortly after the fall of Constantinople, discussions started about the possible restoration of the Byzantine Empire with Crete being the center of it. In 1453 "Sipfis Vlastos' plot" broke out, however the strong Venetian presence didn't let it evolve into a revolutionary movement. The last known revolution of the Cretans broke out in 1527.

Art production was very significant in that period and so was it during the following centuries. The wall paintings of the 13th century bear the typical characteristics of the Late Comnenian art. That is, the artists seem to be stuck to the Byzantine patterns, consequently they can't come in contact with the new currents. The restored frescoed churches on Crete are no more than 20, a relatively small number if one considers the fact that the painted churches of the 14th century are more than 100, whereas there are more than 850 throughout the island. These numbers are not definite, as a great deal of churches have been destroyed in the course of the historic events and adventures of Crete... It often happens that pieces of wall decoration are still found among the ruins. (The church of the Three Hierarchs on the mountain range of Asteroussia, Kyriakou Monastery at Anatoli in the province of Hierapetra, etc).

## NAMES OF BYZANTINE EMPERORS ON INSCRIPTIONS

The cultural elements that show the Cretans' loyalty to Byzantium come from inscriptions still preserved in churches and monasteries. The Cretan founders of churches and monasteries recognized the Byzantine Emperors as their kings, despite the presence of the Venetians on the island and the religious oppression they exercised on them. Frescoes frequently

bear the date of their painting and very often they mention the Byzantine Emperors of the time. Such inscriptions still exist (in chronological order):

a) At the village of Aghios Vasilios, Pediada. In St John's church, situated near the historical convent of Spiliotissa, there is an inscription recording that the wall painting was done in 1291 "*in the reign of Andronicus Palaeologus*".

b) In the beautiful church of St Paul at the village of Aghios Ioannis in Messara (near Phaestos), it is inscribed that the church "*was restored in the reign of our popular and pious King Andronicus Palaeologus and Augusta Irene and their son Michael*" in 1303-1304.

c) In Michael Archangel's church, at the village of Doraki in Monophatsi. It is recorded that the wall paintings were done "*in the reign of Andronicus*" in 1321.

d) In St John's monastery, near the monastery of Kouthoumas in the southern part of central Crete. The inscription reads that "*it was restored in the reign of our kings Ioannis and Helen Palaeologue*" in the year 1360. It refers to Ioannis V and Helen Kantakouzini. It's worth noticing that this church is cavernous and had functioned as a monastery and hermitage till the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

e) In the Virgin's church at the village of Papagianathes in the province of Siteia there is mention of the names of the Emperor Ioannis Palaeologus and his son Andronicus.

f) In the Virgin's church at the village of Scoulouphia, Mylopotamon, there is mention of the name of the Emperor Emmanuel Palaeologus.

g) In St George's church at the village of Plemeniana, Selinon, the name of the Emperor Emmanuel Palaeologus is inscribed.

h) On an inscription of unknown origin, now kept in the Historical Museum of Crete in Heraklion, there is mention of the name of the Emperor Ioannis Palaeologus (1425-1428).

i) In St George's church at the village of Exo Moulia, Siteia, there is mention of the names of the Emperor Ioannis Palaeologus and his mother (Nun Ypomoni=Patience) (1426-1427).

j) In St George's church at the village of Embaros, Pediada, the founder's inscription mentions Ioannis Palaeologus (VIII) as the Emperor of the Romans (1436-1437).

k) The latest known inscription recording the name of a Byzantine Emperor is that of 1446 in St Constantine's church at Avdou. Ioannis Palaeologus was the emperor of Constantinople at that time.

### CRETE IN 1453

Until 1453, the Cretans had been looking to Constantinople. They felt Byzantines in their hearts, they acknowledged -as already said- the Byzantine Emperors as their kings and longed for the day when Crete would again become a "thema" (province) of the Empire. That day never came, though. On the other hand, the change of 1453, which was of universal importance, created an immense chaos. In 1453 the Turks conquered Constantinople and destroyed the powerful State which had dominated in Europe and Near East for more than a thousand years. Some optimistic Cretan people thought that the revival of Byzantium could commence from Crete, still those considerations never attained a substantial content nor did they develop into a movement.

The overthrow of the Byzantine State created a vacuum in the soul of the Cretans on the one hand and on the other it made the island the center of the Greek world. In other words Crete took up the scytale of the Byzantine civilization and managed to become the cultural centre of the Eastern Mediterranean. Byzantine painters abandoned captured Constantinople and settled in Chandax and other Cretan towns. The new artistic currents and the great Byzantine tradition were transferred to the island which was able to adopt that tradition and create a new one.

The Byzantine presence on Crete typically ended in 1211. However, it actually went on and, after 1453, the island became the informal center of the Byzantine world. At the same time Crete prospered economically and commercially and the Venetians had already been assimilated by the local population. The Venetians had conquered the Cretans with the arms but the Cretans had in turn conquered the Venetians with their civilization. The two national and religious groups lived together on the island and the cultural contacts became more and more frequent after the 15th century.



11

10. Wall painting of an Evangelist from St Paul's church, close to Phaestos (graveyard of the village of Aghios Ioannis). Inside the church the founder's inscription is still extant, which dates from 1303-1304 and bears the name of the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus Palaeologus.

11. St John's church close to Spiliotissa. It was painted in 1291 "in the reign of Andronicus Palaeologus".



The Cretans studied in Italian universities and the artistic trends of the West started to become known in the “kingdom of Crete”, as the Venetians called their big possession. The two different worlds combined with the different artistic currents created a peculiar artistic status on the island. The local painters became familiar with the Byzantine as well as with the western art, since the continuous contacts with Venice allowed them to get informed about the developments in the West. It should not be considered accidental that a Cretan painter managed to handle both currents so successfully that he excelled in Europe. We refer to El Greco (Domenicus Theotocopoulos), who was born and grown up in Chandax, where he was taught the art of painting and at a young age left for Italy and Spain. The familiarization of the Cretan artists with both currents is apparent in the works of the prominent Cretan painter Michael Damaskinos, which are kept in the Icon Gallery of Saint Caterina’s church in Heraklion.



13

Nevertheless, the Cretan painting followed other currents after the middle of the 15th century. A different art tradition was created on the island which was regarded as School of painting. The Cretan Post-Byzantine School of painting prevailed till the end of the Venetian occupation and outlived the harsh conditions created by the Turkish occupation of the island, which started in June 1645 and ended in 1669, with the surrender of Chandax, after a long siege. The art workshops of Chandax were organized in the 16th century and their products were exported to the whole Orthodox world. Icons of the Cretan School exist today in the Aegean Islands, Athens, Macedonia, the Ionian Islands, as well as in the Balkan countries and Russia. A sufficient number of those icons has also survived in Venice. The flourishing Greek colonists enriched their households with icons from Crete. The Venetians themselves preferred the ascetic figures of the Byzantine icons to the western more realistic and worldly religious depictions. The trade of works of art constituted a serious source of income for the Cretans over the 16th and 17th centuries. Byzantium, which had died in 1453, continued to exist in art...

12. *View of the Mountain and Monastery of Sinai.* The only work of Domenicus Theotocopoulos extant in Heraklion, the town where the great painter was born and grown up (Historical Museum of Crete).
13. *Saint John the Forerunner,* work of the 16th century. It is believed to be work of Michael Damaskinos (St Mattheus' church of the Sinaites, Heraklion).
14. *Christ.* Work of Emm. Tzane Bounialis (1675), Historical Museum of Crete.
15. *Christ's Deposition from the Cross.* 17th century. It comes from the Savvathiana Convent. Historical Museum.
16. *Saint John.* Wall painting from St George's church, Meronas (13th c.). It has been removed and walled in the



15

## THE HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF CRETE

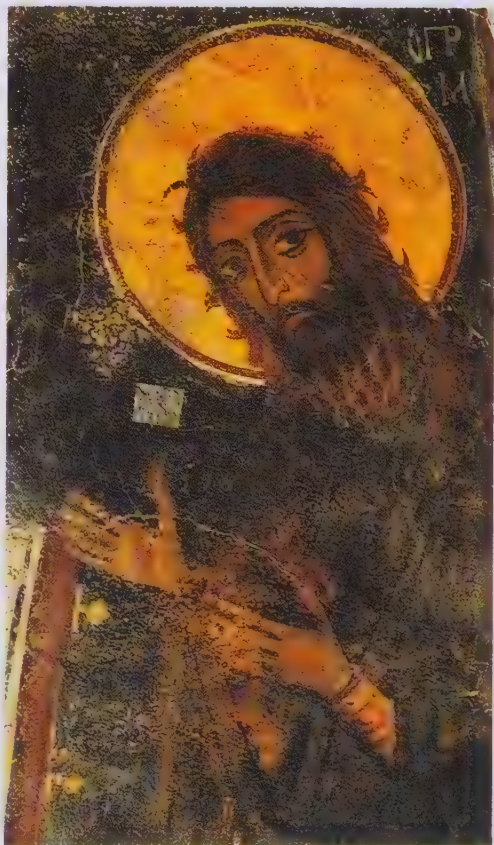
The Historical Museum of Crete, in Heraklion, offers the chance for a better acquaintance with the civilization and the art of Crete from the late antiquity up to our days. Of special importance are the exhibits related to the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine periods, the Christian art and the commodities of everyday life of that time.

The Historical Museum is housed in the neoclassical residence of the great Cretan Kalokairinos family, situated near the port of the town, opposite the "Xenia" hotel. It was founded by a legacy of that wealthy family, on the initiative of the former Mayor of Heraklion and member of the family, Andreas Kalokairinos.

Inscriptions and sculptures of the Byzantine period as well as of the subsequent years are exhibited in the basement. It is worth having a careful look at the exhibits originating from the historical Saint Titus' basilica at Gortys, the first Metropolitan church of Crete, of which a special mention is made in this book. Among them are sections of the iconostasis, the base of the pulpit, some notable capitals and others.

The model of the 17th century town of Heraklion is also exhibited in the basement. A special scientific team has worked for many years to make a model of Chandax (present-day Heraklion) as it was in 1669, when it was captured by the Turks.

16







17. Byzantine jewel. Historical Museum of Crete.

17

On the ground-floor one can admire significant samples of ecclesiastical art, as well as the only work of Domenicus Theotocopoulos (El Greco) kept in the home-town of this great painter of Renaissance. It depicts a view of the Monastery and the Mountain of Sinai. It is exhibited in a special room down the corridor. Recent research in the archives has proved that Greco, who was born and grown up in Heraklion, had been taught the art of painting in the same town, and when he resolved to move to Western Europe he was already an important painter and had been painting icons according to the traditional Cretan style.

Before reaching the room where Greco's painting is exhibited, one can see a small model chapel at the far end of the corridor, the walls of which bear the murals of a small church existing once close to the village of Kastelli in the province of Pediada. That church was destroyed in the years of the German occupation (1941-1944) and the archaeological service removed the wall paintings from the destroyed church very carefully and walled them here.

In the first room to the right of the entrance to the museum one can see a few significant

icons, such as the icon of Christ after his deposition from the Cross, which comes from the convent of Savvathiana, the icon of the Virgin Hodeghitria dating from the 17th century and others. The remarkable ecclesiastical woodcarvings coming from the monastery of Varsamoneron are also kept here; a carved wooden throne and a likewise carved wooden lectern of fine art. In the same room plates with Byzantine jewellery, a beautiful triple candlestick for the altar and many ecclesiastical vessels are exhibited.

In the next room one can see church books, silver-bound Gospel books, vestments, croziers and sacred vessels coming from the dissolved monastery of Asomatos, Rethymnon. The vestments are characteristic Cretan samples of golden ecclesiastical embroidery of the 17th century. Besides the articles from the monastery of Asomatos, some remarkable icons coming from the dissolved monastery of Gouverniotissa, lying near the village of Potamies in the province of Pediada, are exhibited in the same room. Those icons date from the 16th-17th centuries (the Mother of God holding the Holy Infant (Vrephokratousa), Zoothochos Pighi (Life-giving Source), the Apostles Peter and Paul and so on). The icons coming from the church of the Virgin (Gorgoepikoos) near Kali Limenes are also wonderful. In the same room one can see the beautiful metal Byzantine cross coming from the now deserted monastery of Saint John the Theologian, close to the village of Kritsa in the province of Merabello, together with Byzantine jewellery. The collection of coins of the Byzantine emperors exhibited in two special cases is very important. Among them are a few coins of the Saracen Emirs of Crete, who, as we have already stated, ruled the island from 828 to 961 A.D. In another special case in the same room there are the finds from the wreck of the French ship "La Thereze" which transported French soldiers to Heraklion in 1667, when the Turks were laying siege to the town. The ship was wrecked very close to the shores of Crete.

Relics from the fights of the Cretans for their liberation from the Turkish subjugation,

flags of the revolutionaries, as well as documents and pictures of Cretan heroes are exhibited in the room to the left of the entrance.

At the far end of the ground-floor (to the west) there are a few more remarkable exhibits, such as the special recess which has been made in the wall of the museum in the form of a church recess. The wall paintings from the recess of Saint George's church at Meronas, Amari, have been affixed here. That church had been the main church of an old monastery, which was destroyed in the period of the Turkish rule. The archaeologists decided to remove the wonderful frescoes which had been saved and put them in a protected place. On the photos on the wall next to the exhibits one can watch the different steps of that delicate work, the transfer of thin layers of colours and finally the transfer of whole murals.

The room which is to the right down the corridor (next to the recess with the wall paintings) holds copies of important wall paintings from Cretan churches.

On the first floor of the Museum one can see samples of the popular culture of Crete, embroidery, jewellery, woven embroidery, etc., as well as a reproduction of a typical room of a rural Cretan house. Tsouderos' and Kazantzakis' rooms are on the same floor. Emmanuel Tsouderos was an outstanding Cretan politician and Nikos Kazantzakis was a famous writer who was born and grown up in Heraklion. In Kazantzakis' room one can see his desk, his library and many personal effects of his.



18



19



20

Byzantine coins. 18: Of the Emperor Michael I (811-813). 19: of Romanos III Argyros (1028-1043). 20: of Ioannis II Komnenos (1128-1143). They are all kept in the Historical Museum, Heraklion..





1. Byzantine jewel. (Historical Museum).

2, 23, 24. Details from Michael Damaskinos' works. Saint Caterina's Museum in Heraklion.

## ICON COLLECTION IN SAINT CATERINA'S CHURCH

In the center of Heraklion, next to the Metropolitan church of Saint Minas, the old church of Saint Caterina stands. During the Venetian rule it was the main church of the homonymous monastery, which was a dependency of the big Sinai monastery of Saint Caterina. That monastery owned many metochia and estates on Crete, of which only Saint Mattheus' church (on Markopoulos street in Heraklion) still remains in its possession.

Until the capture of Crete by the Turks (1669) Saint Caterina's was one of the most significant ecclesiastical establishments on the island. It had more than 50 monks, owned vast estates around the town and contributed liberally to the education of the orthodox Cretans. When the Turks captured Crete, they changed the church into a mosque, as they did with the rest of the churches in the town. After the liberation of the island it was ceded to the Orthodox population again and the Archbishopric of Crete turned it into a gallery of valuables and icons. The result of that activity was impressive, since scores of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine icons, as well as religious objects and relics were collected in the church. Among them is the wonderful illustrated Gospel book coming from the monastery of Apanosiphis, other religious books, vestments, the woodcarved throne of the monastery of Kera and other items.

Among the icons exhibited in Saint Caterina's church are the paintings of Michael Damaskinos, which until 1800 had been in the monastery of Vrontisi (the Last Supper, the Adoration of the Magi, the Virgin and the Flaming Bush, the Divine Liturgy, Noli me tangere and the First Ecumenical Synod). Damaskinos was one of the most important Cretan painters of the Renaissance. He worked in Chandax (present-day Heraklion) in the 16th century, as well as in Italy and knew







the ecclesiastical art of both the East and the West very well. His peculiar impressive painting is a compromise of both currents, since he managed to combine the western art of the time with the Byzantine austerity. The visitor to the gallery can see for himself how much the later painters were influenced by Michael Damaskinos. The icon "Divine Liturgy" of the year 1704, coming from the monastery of Anopolis and now kept in Saint Caterina's church, is a copy of the original icon of Damaskinos. Other important icons kept in Saint Caterina's church are the following:

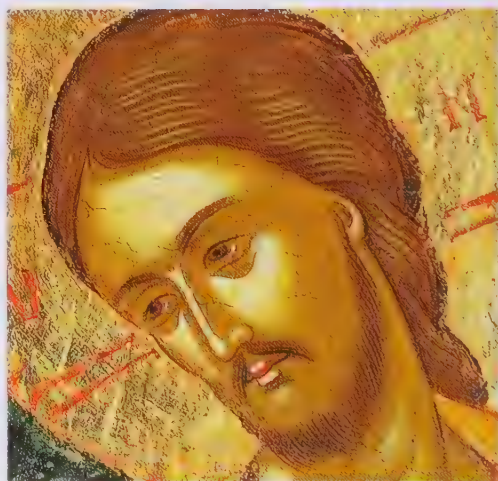
Deesis, of the painter Angelos (dating from the early 15th century), coming from the monastery of Hodeghitria. Saint Phanourios and the miracle of Saint Phanourios (15th c.), again from the monastery of Hodeghitria. Christ Pantocrator of the 15th century. Other icons of Christ (dating from the 16th and the 17th centuries). The ascetic figure of Saint Onouphrios (with the beard reaching down to his feet) of the 16th century. All Saints, an icon dating from the 17th century, Saint John's Beheading of the 18th century, Saint George with scenes from his life, dated 1760, the Tree of Jesse, dated 1703, the Second Advent of the 17th century, the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, dated 1670, Saint John the Theologian of the 18th century, Saint Gregorius Dialogus and many others. Under the icons there are special labels giving information about the date of the painting and the ecclesiastical establishment (monastery or church) which they come from.

## PRESENT-DAY CHURCHES

Saint Minas' magnificent cathedral is not an old building. It was actually erected in the closing years of the 19th century (1862-1895). Although it was painted during the recent years, its icons attract our interest because they show the survival of the Byzantine art in modern Greece. Next to the big church is another church dedicated to the same Saint. It is an old church which remained inactive during the Turkish occupation and became the metropolitan church of Heraklion only in 1735, with the permission of the Turkish authorities. The old icons of Kastrophylakas



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(18th century), kept in the church, are of extreme importance.

Another interesting church in Heraklion is Saint Titus' cathedral on 25 August str. The first metropolitan church of the town had been on its site. In the course of the Venetian rule it held significant ecclesiastical keepsakes, among which was the icon of the Virgin, that was transferred to Italy (Venice) after the capture of Heraklion. Saint Titus' skull, who was the Apostle Paul's friend and collaborator, was also kept there. The Turks changed the church into a mosque. In 1856 it was gravely damaged by the earthquake that hit Crete in that year and after many years it was rebuilt, as a mosque, though. After the liberation of Crete it became an Orthodox church again. Its architecture, however, reminds of a mosque even today. The frescoes are very interesting. They were painted a few years ago by the painter Dimitris Sarithakis, who painted the icons of the iconostasis, too. They constitute an amazing survival of the Byzantine religious art in Crete, as it was expressed by the paint-brush of a contemporary artist.

### BYZANTINE MONUMENTS IN ARCHANES

Archanes is a beautiful town, 15 kms distant from Heraklion, and looks very interesting to anyone who would like to watch the development of a Cretan town through the ages. It was an important Minoan centre in the Minoan period. Nonetheless, the town of Archanes is an interesting town owing to its Byzantine monuments, too. On the summit of Mount Yiouchtas (where Zeus was buried according to the ancient tradition) the church of Our Saviour (Transfiguration) stands, which holds a celebration on 6th August. On that day the priest blesses the fresh grapes which are offered to Christ at the church, exactly as the ancient Cretans offered the first and best fruit of the land to their gods. It is a centuries-old Greek custom still surviving in many Greek regions and almost throughout Crete. The four-aisled church of Our Saviour had been the main church of an old monastery which was dissolved in the middle of the 17th century, when the Turks were laying siege to Heraklion. On the northern side of the same village there are also the ruins of other



25. M. Damaskinos, *The Adoration of the Magi*. (Detail).

26, 27. M. Damaskinos, *Noli me Tangere*. (Detail).

28. *One of the Magi*. Detail from the "Adoration of the Magi". It is believed to be a self-portrait of the great painter. (The painters used to include their faces in the paintings and are recognized by the fact that they are the only ones looking the painter straight in the eyes).



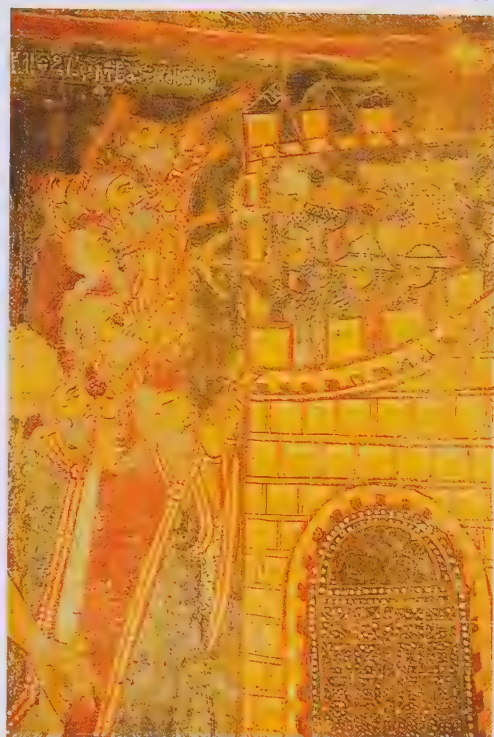
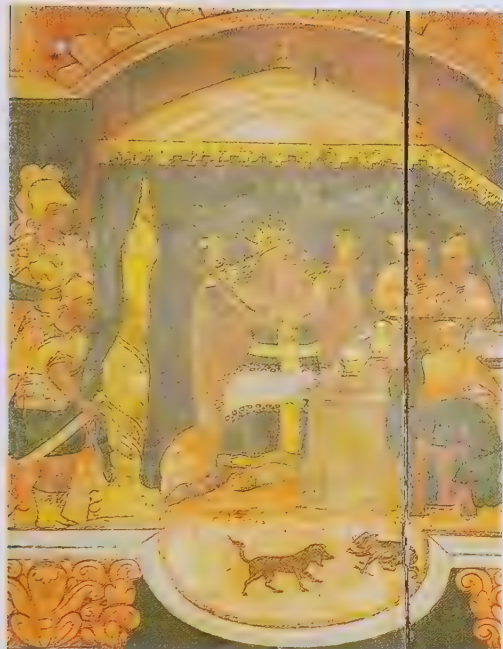
monasteries, which were destroyed by the Ottoman conqueror. Among them was the monastery of Saint George Skalotos, which was changed into a sheep-fold and hasn't functioned as a monastery ever since! Its vestiges survive at a site near the village of Aghios Vlasis which is known by the name of "Trantalithis' metochi". On the same mountain (northern side) are the ruins of another ecclesiastical monument. We refer to "the nuns' cells", a building adjusted to the rock, with impressive architecture, deserted today. In order to get there one has to walk for 20 minutes from Yiouchtas, guided by a local resident, though.

Close to Archanes there survives the church of Asomatos with fine wall decoration, among huge trees and next to a spring with crystal clear water. The church was painted in 1315, as witnessed by an inscription on the southern wall. One should have a look at the icon of Christ Pantocrator, as well as at the depictions of the Annunciation, the Sacrifice of Abraham, the Ascension of Christ, Crucifixion, Second Advent, Epitaph, the Walls of Jericho and others.

Another significant monument in the town of Archanes is the church of the Virgin, not only because of its architecture or its antiquity, but also because of the icons kept in it. The priest of Archanes has collected a number of valuable Post-Byzantine icons, 20 of which date from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The "Adoration of the Magi", work of an unknown Cretan painter, shows the influence of Michael Damaskinos' style upon the later painters, as well as the decisive role he played in the evolution of the Post-Byzantine religious art on the island. The icons are numbered. The numbers 1-19 correspond to the oldest icons (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> c.), the numbers 20-31 to icons of the 18<sup>th</sup> c., while the numbers 31-46 correspond to icons of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, except for the icon No 40 which bears an inscription dated 1707.

There are also other frescoed churches in the town of Archanes, such as the church of the Holy Trinity (14<sup>th</sup> c.), with rich wall decoration, and the church of Saint Paraskevi (14<sup>th</sup> c.). The priest of the town has the keys to the doors of the churches.





29. The belfry of the Virgin's church (Panaghia) in the village of Archanes. Many notable Cretan icons are kept in this church.

30. St John's Beheading. (Detail). The Virgin's church, Archanes.

31. Detail from an icon. The Virgin's church, Archanes.

32. The Punishment of the Damned. Wall painting from the church of Asomatos, Archanes.

33. The Walls of Jericho. Beautiful wall painting from the church of Asomatos, Archanes.

34. The church of Asomatos at a beautiful site close to the village of Archanes. Michael Patsithiotis (1315) is mentioned as the founder of the church in the inscription on the southern internal wall.



## THE MONASTERIES

Evidence about the oldest monasteries vanishes deep in time. The location of the island in the Eastern Mediterranean, at the crossroad of the sea ways of the district, has given its population the unique chance to come in contact with the religious and worship centres of Middle East and Egypt. The sea routes of that time connected Rome, the mighty capital of the Roman Empire, with its possessions in Near East. Christian religion had already become known on the island and had been widespread due to those sea ways. Apostle Paul's arrival in Crete is a fact that influenced the Christian religion and even today it remains alive in the local traditions. It is a certainty that monastic Orthodoxy followed the same route on Crete, having originated from the big monastic centres of Egypt.

Monasteries had existed on Crete since the first Byzantine period, before 824. There is no evidence as to whether monastic Orthodoxy managed to survive through the difficult period of the Arab occupation (824/828-961). It is, however, known that after its liberation and its union with Byzantium, monastic Orthodoxy started to spread on Crete at a brisk pace. Numerous monasteries were founded in those early years and some of them are still extant on the island.

The capture of Crete by the Venetians was the cause of new religious problems. The Pope believed that he had complete religious authority over any Venetian possessions. His followers believed that they could influence the Cretans and convert their Orthodox faith. Crete was transformed into a field of religious fights and the Pope took considerable action on every part of the island supported by the Venetian authorities. The resolution of the official State to prohibit the Orthodox hierarchs from staying on the island was of great help to him. A headless church could more easily be submitted. In a short time the Catholic Church and the Latin Archbishop of Crete subjected all the large monasteries, which until 1204 had been under the protection of the Byzantine Emperor himself. The resistance of the Orthodox people was manifested shortly

afterwards and was vigorous. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which had not stopped functioning despite the Turkish occupation, sent hierarchs out to Crete in order to invigorate the nationalist and religious spirit of the subjugated. Among them was Joseph Vryenius, who had stayed for many years in the now devastated monastery of Prophet Helias at the village of Smari. The Venetians often arrested the correspondents from Constantinople and imprisoned them. The state of things favoured the founding of monasteries at remote places. Educated monks, who vigorously protested against the plans of the Catholic church, refuted there. Those monks played both a religious and a nationalist role. After the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Joseph Philagris, a learned clergyman who supported the Orthodox Church applying theological arguments, settled on the slopes of Kophinas, the highest crest of the mountain range of Asteroussia on the south of Crete. He challenged the pro-Catholic theologians on issues of dogmas and at the same time he operated a school in a humble monastery (the Three Hierarchs) where he himself taught Astronomy, Philosophy, Divinity etc. Another monk of the time, Neilos Damilas, a great disputant of the pro-Catholics, lived at the monastery of Karkasa, near the village of Anatoli, in the area of Hierapetra. His monastery lies in ruins today and only the church with the beautiful wall paintings is still preserved.

At that same time the first Catholic monasteries were founded. The western monastic orders of the Dominicans, the Franciscans etc. founded large monasteries in the big urban centers. One can see the cathedral of St Peter of the Dominicans near the harbour in Heraklion, the cathedral of the Franciscans in Rethymnon, the monastery of St Nikolaos at Splazzia in Chania etc.

A great number of monasteries continued to function on Crete in the course of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some of them were very well organized and others were so small that they looked rather like hermitages. The religious oppression of the Orthodox people continued. It was then that piratical raids started against the coastal areas of Crete. Mohammedan pirates pillaged and plundered the coast. Some

of the coastal villages were abandoned and many monasteries became extinct. We now have very little information about that period. We only know that they existed and that they were a support to Cretan Orthodoxy.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century is a period of great changes. The Turks increased their power dangerously and started threatening the Venetian "Saint Mark's Serene Republic". The Venetians realized that soon and tried to improve their relations with the Orthodox Cretans; in fact that was the reason why the Cretans of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and the early 17<sup>th</sup> century enjoyed some kind of religious freedom. The Venetians, who till then had put hindrances in the founding of new monasteries, now encouraged the erection of monasteries in remote areas. They actually supported -even economically- monasteries that could play not only a religious but also a defensive role. It concerns big fortified monasteries, such as the monastery of Akrotiriani (Toplou) of the Siteia province.

At that time numberless monasteries were founded or restored throughout the island, yet for other than religious reasons. The Venetian State had made laws to relieve the monks from their obligations towards the State and above all from the compulsory labour of the sea, that is the citizens' obligation to pull at the oar and move the Venetian galleys. That was actually a terrible duty. There were a lot of people who could't endure it and drew their last breath in the galleys. Those events had a bad effect on the development of monasticism for the reason that hundreds of Cretans became monks only in order to avoid the labour of the sea. Those people had never intended to live the rigid and full of sacrifice and want life of a monk. They simply played the monks, occasionally stayed at a monastery and usually led the regular life of any citizen. They had only found a way to react and avoid the compulsory labour imposed by the conquerors. Since those people weren't usually accepted in organized monasteries they used to... found their own or restore an old one and stay there. The lack of Orthodox ecclesiastic administration was the main reason why the Orthodox monasticism could't be organized. Venice tried to control the situation and contributed financially to the organi-

zation of large coenobitic monasteries on the island.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was the time of the monastic flourishing on the island of Crete. There were over 6000 monks then and more than 1000 active monasteries. Most of those monasteries were very small, with two or three monks, and short-living, that is they were dissolved as soon as there had been no reason for their existence any longer. Yet, that was not the real picture of Cretan monasticism. Outstanding clergymen lived in the big monastic centres of the island and created a significant monastic tradition. Some of them became prelates and others patriarchs, such as the eminent Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Cyrilos Loukaris, who was murdered by outraged Turks, the Patriarch of Alexandria Meletios Pigas, the Bishop of Cythera Maximos Margounios, the Archbishop of Philadelphia Gabriel Seviros and many others.

Around the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (June 1645) the Turks attacked Crete. The monasteries made a determined stand against them, regardless of the fact that the Turks, following their own policy, had promised to bring the Orthodox sees back on the island, which they actually did. The monks resisted stubbornly and fought passionately against the Turks by taking cover inside the monasteries or by forming army corps. The new conquerors didn't leave the monasteries and the monks unpunished. They slaughtered, pillaged, destroyed. The monasteries which had resisted were confiscated and delivered to the Turkish soldiers. Throughout the period 1645-1669 scores of monasteries were destroyed and their ruins are still extant in some parts of the island.

The Turks eventually captured Crete. (Heraclion fell in 1669 after a siege and bloody fights that lasted 22 years). They imposed heavy taxes on the monasteries and didn't cease disturbing and oppressing them day in day out. Whichever small monasteries couldn't afford the taxes and the Turks' challenge, became inactive or dependencies of the larger ones. Out of the approximately 1000 monasteries that had functioned before 1645, fewer than 50-60 managed to survive in the opening years of the Ottoman rule. They were only those which could pay the taxes and also



hire a powerful Mohammedan to provide protection - if paid well.

The Turkish occupation of the island changed the living conditions dramatically. The civilization shortly declined and the oppressor's religious habits predominated in the big towns and the wealthy villages. The splendid churches, both Orthodox and Latin, were converted into mosques. Other churches and monasteries became storehouses, stables and shops. A number of wealthy Greeks and Venetians abjured their faith and embraced Islamism so that they wouldn't lose their privileges and property. Double faith became a phenomenon of those years. Many people appeared to be Muslims, went to mosques and performed their typical duties as followers of Islam while deep in heart they believed in Christ and kept icons hidden in the basements of their houses. They were Cryptochristians, as they were called in Turkish-held Crete.

The role of the monasteries became more complicated. There were no schools and education opportunities, therefore the monks who knew how to read and write had to take up the teacher's role. Groups of children gathered in the monasteries and were taught how to read and write through the holy books of the church. The children wrote the alphabet and extracts from religious texts on the covers and margins of those books in order to practice writing. Such books are still preserved in specific monasteries. At that same time the Cretans found themselves in a dramatic economic situation. Their most fertile estates were seized by the Turks without any compensation. For this reason the Cretans preferred to donate their land to the monasteries, since property belonging to churches or monasteries could not be usurped upon by the conquerors. The already rich monasteries of the island turned out to be economic giants. Toplou monastery in the province of Siteia, Apanosiphis, Angarathos, Apezanes and Hodegitria in the prefecture of Heraklion, Arkathi and Prevelis in the prefecture of Rethymnon and Gouverneto, Aghia Triatha, Chrysopighi and Gonia in the prefecture of Chania were the richest on the island. The wants of the native population were dire and quite often there was scarcely any bread or oil, products which are both so generously pro-

duced by the Cretan land. The monasteries, therefore, had to support whole families in very poor and infertile areas.

The national contribution of the monasteries was remarkable. Even from the early years of the Turkish domination they sheltered the peculiar Cretan revolutionaries, "the Chainis". The word "Chainis" is of Turkish origin and signifies the traitor, the faithless. In Crete, however, it obtained a different meaning, that of the partisan, the rebel. The Chainis were men who went up to the mountains and fought against the oppressors. They weren't organized army groups but fought individually and usually each one of them resumed the responsibility to avenge and punish those who oppressed his compatriots. In those years the Cretans' life was literally in the Ottomans' hands. They abducted the girls away from their houses and closed them in their harems. They could quite unreasonably kill anyone without rendering an account either to the partial Turkish justice or to anybody else. The Chainis, therefore, had themselves undertaken the protection of the weak. Some of them were called "Kalisperides", because they presented themselves in the houses of the Agas and the Turkish lords at nightfall and killed them after having said "good evening" (kalispera). They could not obviously be caught for they were brave and strong and besides they were familiar with the wild mountains and could hide themselves safely. The Chainis were the greatest hope of the subjugated Cretans. Those Chainis took a refuge in the monasteries of Crete. The monks felt it their obligation and duty to offer hospitality to the passers-by and certainly to the fighters for Cretan freedom. When the time of the great uprising had come, the monasteries allocated all their property to the purchase of arms for the fighters. Nevertheless, the monks were revolutionaries themselves. In the monastery of Hodeghitria in Mesara, Xopateras' tower is still standing, a medieval tower inside which a monk barricaded himself in 1828 and fought alone against the organized Turkish army. He was defeated only when he had no amunitions left, having killed a great number of Turks already. There is also the characteristic example of the monastery of Arkathi, near Rethymnon. In 1866 women and children, together with

revolutionaries, entrenched themselves inside it. The Turks besieged the monastery and began to cannonade it. When the enclosed realized that no hope was left for them, they decided to explode the powder magazine. Hundreds of people, both Turks and Greeks, were crushed under stones and wood. People throughout Europe dis-cussed the drama of the subjugated Cretans. Prominent men of letters, such as Victor Hugo, wrote passionate articles aiming at moving the international diplomats to proceed towards the liberation of Crete.

The struggle and the successive revolts of the Cretans made the Ottomans decide to grant religious freedom. After an agreement msde in 1856 the Cretans were allowed to perform their religious duties. Soon afterwards a great monastic development took place throughout the island. From 1860 to 1890 quite a number of monasteries were restored which till then - and for almost two centuries - had been deserted and a few new ones were founded. During that period the monasteries of Kapsas, Aghia Sophia and Phaneromeni in the province of Siteia, Exakousti in the province of Hierapetra, Vithiani on the Plateau of Lasithi, Kouthoumas on the south coast of the prefecture of Heraklion, Aghii Pateres in the prefecture of Chania and a few others came to the front. Most founders of new monasteries or restorers of old ones were powerful church personalities. Some of them are today worshipped as Saints, such as Holy Parthenios and Eumenios (restorers of the Kouthoumas monastery) and Holy Yerontoyiannis from the Kapsas monastery.

Following the liberation of Crete in 1898 and its union with Greece, the monks devoted themselves to their religious duties again. A great number of the monasteries that had been active till the closing years of the Turkish Occupation were then deserted. Nonetheless, they are still considered sacred places and the residents of the nearby villages gather there at least once a year to celebrate the honoured Saint. Today there are 40 monasteries active on Crete, each one occupied by a restricted number of monks. Exception to the rule are certain convents which are flourishing today and are organized according to the monastic order. Such are the monasteries of Chryso-



35. Saint Onouphrios. 16th century. St Caterina's Museum. The anchorites and the hermits are still alive in the tradition of the island. The ascetics of the Cretan tradition remind of St Onouphrios' figure and attire.



pighi (prefecture of Chania), Paliani, Savvathiana, Kalyviani and Aghia Irini at Krousouas (prefecture of Heraklion).

## MONASTICISM AND HERMITISM

Monasticism is an attitude of life which relies on the renunciation of the joys of life, on want and praying for the salvation of the soul. In pursuit of that aim the anchorites prefer to abandon the inhabited areas and resort to others, far off and deserted, where they lead either an organized monastic life or an ascetic one. That trend had existed even before the emergence of Christianity in certain eastern religions, whilst it is Epimenides the Cretan who is regarded as the first hermit. In Christian religion monasticism acquired a different significance. It appeared as a reaction to the social corruption which was prevailing in the Roman State and to the loose morals of the society of that time. Later on it became a way of life with a philosophical meaning. The monk was (and still is) obliged to devote himself completely to God. As a movement it appeared first in Egypt and Middle East, but soon enough it extended to other areas of the Mediterranean. Big monastic centres were then founded in Syria, Kappadocia, Mount Sinai, Holy Land, Holy Mountain (Athos), Constantinople, Crete and other Greek areas. Hermitism and Asceticism are forms of the monastic life having existed since the time the Christian religion began to spread. They both rely on the renunciation of the joys of life as well as on self-denial. The hermit feeds himself with roots and vegetables, lives in caves and doesn't concern himself with his body, only with his soul.

Hermitism came to full bloom in Crete. The first known hermit on Crete was Cosmas who lived in the course of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Today he is considered a Saint by the Catholic Church. On the Asteroussia (a range of mountains on the southern side of central Crete) there were hermits even in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The last hermits lived in that area in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Other such areas are Akrotiri in the prefecture of Chania and the southern coast of the prefecture of Rethymnon.

## THE MONKS' LIFE

The monk's life was not easy at all throughout the Byzantine period. He was obliged to combine hard work with worship and prayer. It's needless to say that Orthodox worship required continuous vigilance and long praying. The cycle of the monk's life closed within the walls of the monastery. That was at the same time his place of residence, his place of worship and praying, he would even be buried there, in grave yards or graves which were either outside the church or even inside it. During the recent decades the monks have been buried in special cemeteries outside the area of the monastery. Monks' graves are still to be seen inside the churches of many old monasteries. That custom has ceased since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> or the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when special cemeteries were founded in lots of monasteries. In big monastic establishments there existed particular burial churches, inside which the dead monks' bones were kept.

▲ An Orthodox monk's day is divided into three eight-hour periods. One is devoted to prayer, the other to work and the third to rest and sleep. The monk either works in the farm, raises the cattle or works inside the monastery. His survival as well as the survival of the monastery itself as a self-governed whole is thus secured. Praying is either collective or individual. The division into eight-hour periods makes everyday life even harder. In a large number of monasteries even today, life starts at two or three o'clock after midnight, at the same time as the orthros (the morning rituals) in the church.

## COENOBITIC AND IDIORRHYTHMIC MONASTERIES

In the Orthodox East there were two organizational types of monasteries. The coenobitic (communal) and the idiorrhythmic, although one can trace elements of both systems in a few monasteries even today.

Coenobitic are those monasteries (usually large) where the monks live in a body, share a common economy and a common refectory. These monasteries are headed by the Abbot, who is elected by the monks themselves in a democratic manner every three or four years. The abbot is surrounded by the counsellors, whereas in earlier years there was the so called

“Synod of the Elderly”. The “Elderly” were old monks who had excelled in virtue and spiritual exercise. The Counsellors and the Elderly were all elected in the same manner as the abbot. The mode of the election as well as the way of governance were defined by written rules, the “Typikon”. The drafter of the “Typikon” of each monastery was usually the founder of it himself. “Typikons” had all the same philosophy, dependent on exercise and observance of the rules of monastic life as defined by the Fathers of the Church, and also including a lot of differentiations which had to do either with the specific conditions prevailing in certain areas or with geographic or other particularities. Most frequently the abbot was not elected directly by the monks but by the “Synod of the Elderly”. That election, a reminder of the Byzantine magnificence, combined the introversion and the invocation of the divine assistance. The Elderly confined themselves within the church and elected the new abbot by secret voting. The chiming, the solemnity and the investiture ceremony of the new abbot created a bright atmosphere.

In coenobitic monasteries the individual is simply part of the whole. The obligations and the duties are common for everybody. Each monk is obliged to accomplish his duty delegated by the fraternity in the best possible way. One prepares the food, another is responsible for the church, a third for opening and closing the central gate, someone else for cattle-raising, cheese-making and so on. As already stated, all monks share the same food which is served only in the common refectory, a large rectangular room. In a number of monasteries meat is excluded from the diet. They eat only vegetables and legumes and, in no-fasting periods, fish. Lunch and dinner always start and end with prayers. At meal-times one of the monks reads texts of moralizing content from religious or other books.

The monk can eat only in the refectory. He is not permitted to keep foodstuff in his cell, as it is a serious misdeed which deserves a spiritual penalty.

The monks don't get paid for their work and they don't handle money. The farms they cultivate or the flocks and cattle they raise do not belong to them, whilst the money they get by selling products are deposited in the monasterial fund and the monastery in turn

provides the members of brotherhood with a small salary to meet their personal needs. The monks' clothing and their extras, such as medical, hospital and pharmaceutical needs, are covered by the monasterial fund. In many large monasteries there were special wards where trained monks nursed the patients.

Coenobitic monasteries are still extant on Crete today, for example Chrysopighi in the prefecture of Chania, Aghia Irini in the prefecture of Rethymnon and Savvathiana in the prefecture of Heraklion. They are all convents.

In the idiorhythmic monasteries each monk practises his own economy. The monastery assigns each one a small area of cultivated land, which becomes the source of income for him. The common refectory functions only on feastal days (Resurrection, Christmas, feast of the Saint who the monastery is consecrated to, and so on). In the remainder of the time each monk cares for his food and his clothing. There are, however, a lot of elements in idiorhythmic monasteries deriving from the coenobitic system.

Administration in idiorhythmic monasteries doesn't actually differ from that in coenobitic ones. The abbot is elected in the same mode (by the monks) and so are his counsellors.

Although the monasteries are self-governed, they are nonetheless within the jurisdiction of a higher ecclesiastic authority. Most of them are subjected to the local bishops, still a considerable number of them are subjected directly to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Those monasteries are called “Stavropighia”.



## MONASTERIAL ARCHITECTURE

Monasterial architecture, as developed in the Orthodox East, is a peculiar and rather complicated subject, since it combines elements of worship with technique. We are going to endeavour a general description without entering into details that would extend the length of the text. Byzantine monasteries look like small towns or villages with proper self-governance and special rules that order the everyday life and the relations between the members of the monastic community. The anchorites had a common end, exercise and the salvation of their soul. In pursuit of that aim they had to adjust their lives to the specific needs of praying and devotion to God in order to gain the kingdom of heaven. The commonest monasterial type is the fortified one. That architectural type has prevailed throughout the Orthodox world, yet with specific and local differentiations. The oldest and largest monasteries of Crete are fortified. That is, they look like a fortress, which provides safety and defence in case of piratical or other hostile invasions.

The fortress is usually square or rectangular and right in the middle stands the holy church, the center of worship, which bears the name "katholikon". The dimensions of the church are analogous to the area of the monastery. The monks' living quarters, as well as the other buildings, occupy the internal sides of the fortress, for reasons both of space economy and security. The external wall of the cells is thicker, since it serves as the fortification of the monastery. The fortress was usually ipregnable by the arms of that time. Owing to the fact that Crete was exposed to the pirates who often plundered the coast, the coastal monasteries, but also the remote ones, were fortified in the best possible way. There is the characteristic example of the monastery of Akrotiriani (Toplou) in the province of Siteia, which has been preserved in a very good condition.

At the western side of the building there is the pylon and the passage. It is the central gate of the monastery which opens at dawn and closes at nightfall. The pilgrims and visitors to the monastery enter through it. There is a monk responsible for the gate who is speci-

fically charged with that task. Its location at the western side is not accidental: the worshipper can follow the shortest way from the pylon to the entrance of the church in order to get in and bow before the icons or pray and then leave without disturbing the monastic community. Since, however, pilgrims could most probably arrive even before sunrise, when the gate was closed, they had seen to the existence of a vaulted building in front of the pylon, with two benches on either side, so that those awaiting the opening of the monastery were protected from the weather conditions.

Besides the central gateway, there are also two or three minor, secondary ones. They lead the monks to the fields for the workaday routine. Stronger measures had to be taken for the protection of the monks residing in monasteries at far-off places. That was accomplished with the erection of special defensive towers, inside which the monks barricaded themselves in periods of raids. Behind the heavy tower gate the monks were relatively safe. As, however, there was the danger of forcing the gate, the towers had the so-called "killers" or "katahytras" (casters). Casters were special holes right over the tower gates. If an invader happened to force his entry through the gate, the monks would throw scalding oil or lead through them and compel him to hurry away. Such a tower with its "casters" still survives at the monastery of Hodeghitria in Mesara in the prefecture of Heraklion. Special care was taken for the domestic animals of the monastery. Those animals were bred at the monastery, in special stables, but the monks never let them pass through the central gate, nor let them hang about in the courtyard of the monastery. There was a special entrance for the animals and especially the animals which transported people and agricultural products.

The anchorites lived in cramped little cells. The doorway of the cell was so narrow and so low that the monk had to stoop in order to get in. Sign of submission and decency... Within the square building establishment there are the rooms of common use, such as the refectory, the kitchen, the bakery and others. Most eminent of all is the abbot's office, the administrative office of the monastery.

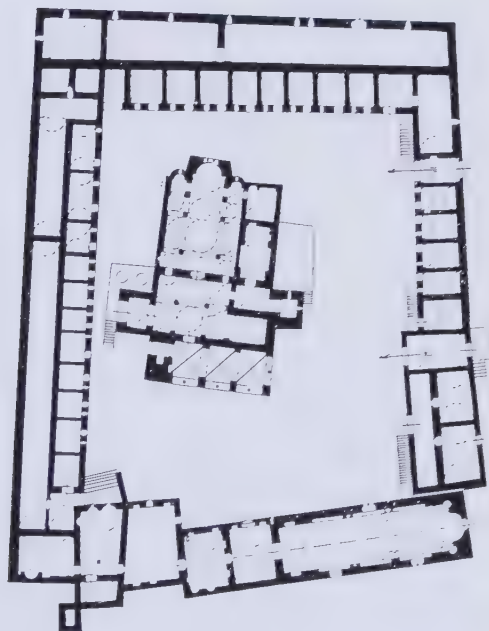
## CRETAN MONASTERIES

Today there are approximately 40 monasteries on Crete, most of which function with a large number of monks. We refer to the large monasteries, those which had a considerable property and managed to survive over hard times, especially throughout the Turkish occupation, when the taxes were unbearable. In earlier times there were many more monasteries, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century they were more than 1000!

The present book includes information about the history and the worship in monasteries, together with general information which is of primary interest to the present-day visitor. It deals with the monasteries which were founded in older times and present historical interest, whereas specific mention is made to monasteries which are not active today, but they can still be visited.



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36. A fortified monastery on Crete. (Toplou Monastery).  
37. Ground plan of a fortress-like monastery. (An. Orlandos, *Monasterial Architecture*).



## *Angarathos - Pediada - Lassithi*

**T**he suggested trip gives one the chance to visit the country regions of the prefecture of Heraklion, abound with vast vineyards and olive groves. Follow the old national road from Heraklion to Aghios Nikolaos and on the 8<sup>th</sup> km turn right, drive towards the village of Episkopi and from there continue to the monastery of Angarathos. From Episkopi you can also visit some other important Christian monuments of the area. If you want to go to the monastery of Anopolis or to the deserted but impressive monastery of Kyria Eleoussa, you have to take the new national road towards Anopolis or Gouves accordingly.

From the monastery of Angarathos the road continues until it meets the road to Kastelli. From Kastelli you can take an earth road and go to the Kallergis monastery or to the other monuments of the area.

Before arriving at Kastelli, you can proceed towards the Plateau of Lassithi. It is a wonderful trip leading to the impressive plateau and the Post-Byzantine monuments of the region.

### **MONASTERY OF ANGARATHOS MONASTERIES AND CHURCHES AT EPISKOPİ**

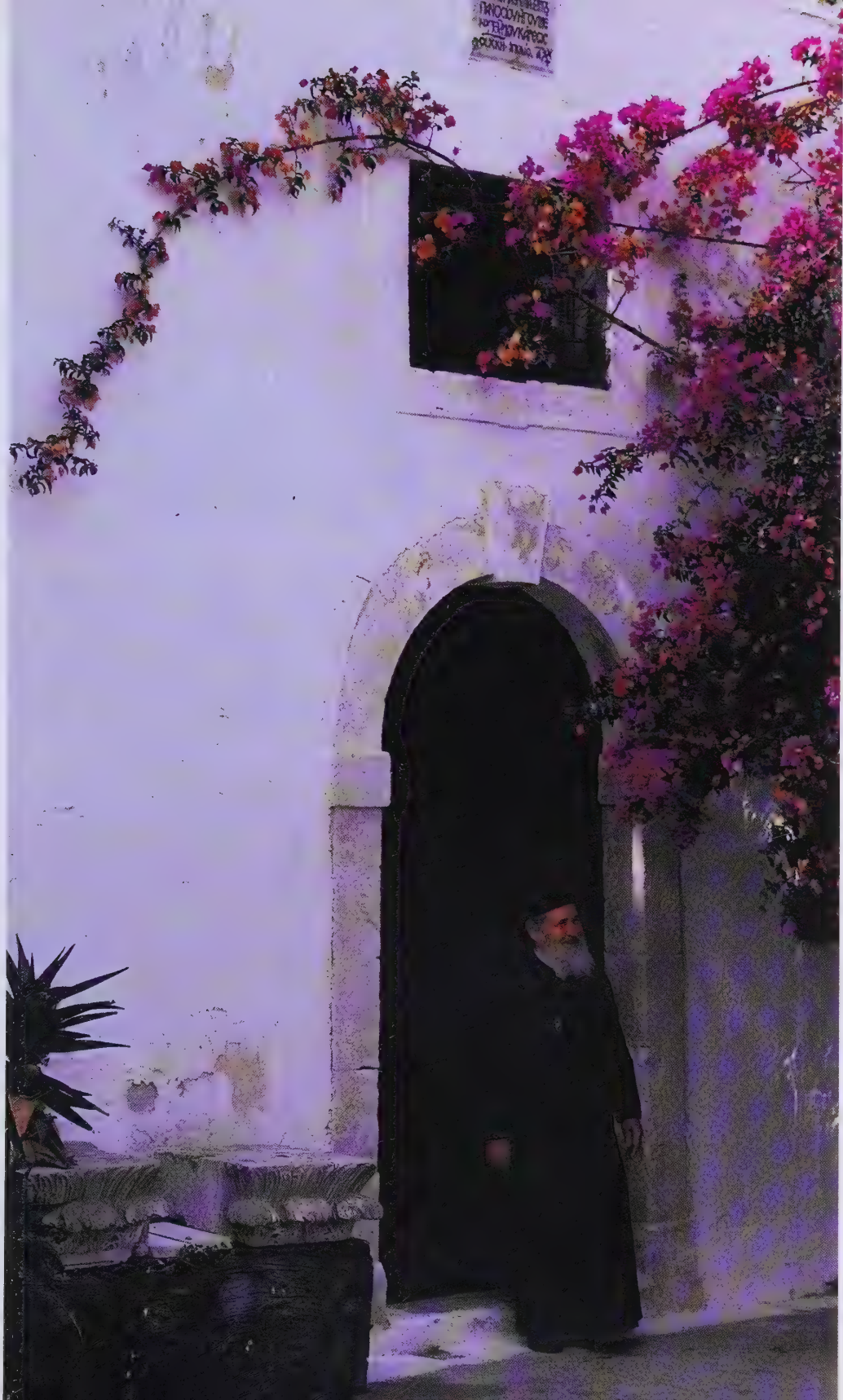
The monastery of Angarathos lies on a rather rocky eminence, between the villages of Sgourokephali and Sambas, 23 kms away from Heraklion. The visitor can reach it by following the route Heraklion - Amnisos - Episkopi - Sgourokephali - Angarathos, but he can also take the main road of the province of Pediada from Heraklion to Kastelli and turn to the left, a fairly long distance past the village of Aghies Paraskies.

It is a centuries-old monastery dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but it is likely to have been founded even during the second Byzantine period. However, there are not any sources that could enable one to draw such conclusions. At first it was a small monastery which belonged to the great Kallergis family, a Cretan family of distinguished men, with important revolutionary activity against the Venetian conquerors of Crete. The first known abbot of the monastery was Niphon Notaras. As indicated by the surviving information, it was Niphon who re-organized and brought into notice the so far small monastery. The Kallergis family granted it quite an amount of landed property which increased later through both donations and purchases.

The development of the monastery continued in the following years. Fortification works started in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the monastery attained a fortress-like

form, with three gateways, the one at the southern side serving as the main entrance. There is an abundance of buildings from the old fortified construction surviving today, such as the two pylons, the old vaulted stables and others. Before the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the construction had been completed and the monastery was predominant over the whole area where scores of smaller monasteries stood, most of which gradually became subject to Angarathos. At that time the abbots of the monastery came from the island of Cythera, which is a relatively short distance from Crete. The first abbot of the monastery was Maximos Loukaris, the brother of the renowned church man and Ecumenical Patriarch Cyrilos Loukaris. Maximos took up the governance of the monastery in 1619, in a harsh period with big economic difficulties. He was, however, a man of organizing ability and managed to put an end to the poor financial state of the monastery. The visitor to the monastery can see a founder's inscription bearing his name. It is on the left to the main entrance. In 1637 the community of Angarathos comprised 60 monks, had a considerable income from agricultural products (grains, wine, oil, olives, legumes and vegetables) and generally was one of the wealthiest Cretan monasteries. Maximos' administration was very efficient...

The location of the monastery at the center of Crete allowed it to play a substantial role for the Cretan Orthodox faith. Aiming at that,





an outstanding church personality of Venetian-held Crete ascended on the abbacy of Angarathos following Maximos Loukaris' death. It was Meletios Pantogalos, the former abbot of the monastery of Akrotiriani, Siteia (now Toplou). There is no information as to how long Meletios served as abbot at Angarathos, apparently it must have been in the years preceding the Turkish assault against Crete.

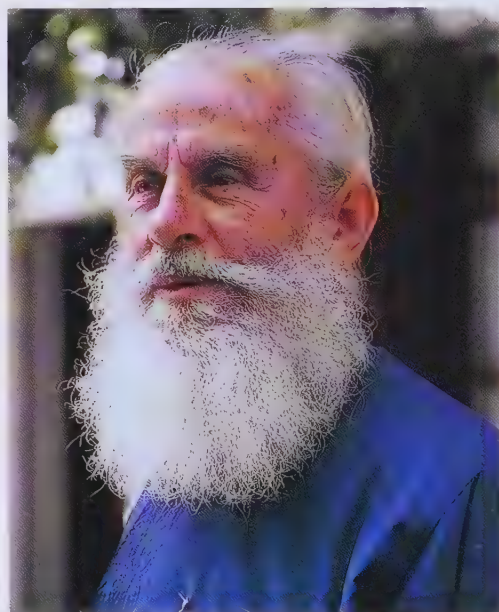
Today it is believed that the monastery of Angarathos was a center of education in the course of the Venetian occupation, where young students, both clergymen and laymen, received education and handwritten books were copied out. Monks and abbots of Angarathos ascended all the steps of the hierarchy and became even Patriarchs (Cyrilos Loukaris, Meletios Pigas, Silvestros the Cretan).

The Turks attacked Crete in June 1645. In that same year they seized Chania while in the following year they captured Rethymnon. When they finally reached the countryside of the prefecture of Heraklion, Athanasios Christophoros was the abbot of Angarathos, a forceful hieromonk who unhesitatingly took the arms, formed a corps of irregulars and fought fiercely against the Turks. He became widely known through the work of the poet and historian Marinos Tzane Bounialis, who wrote that Athanasios made an archway out of Turkish soldiers' heads so that the Venetian General would pass underneath! Shortly after Athanasios' powerful resistance, the Turks occupied the whole countryside of Crete and laid siege to its capital, Chandax (present-day Heraklion). The uncontroversial fighter, Abbot Athanasios, fled away from the island in time. He took refuge in Italy, where he transferred a great deal of church valuables in order to save them from the Ottomans' hands. The Venetians welcomed him and he lived there for the remainder of his life.

The last abbot in the years of the Venetian rule was Meletios Kallonas, whose origin was from the island of Cythera. It is not precisely known when he succeeded Athanasios. He only bore the title of the abbot but didn't live long enough to carry out his duties as an abbot. His stay at the monastery was of great importance. He anticipated the forecoming danger and forwarded the valuable sacred



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38. (p. 35) Angarathos Monastery. Over the gate an inscription is visible which mentions the name of Maximos Loukaris, abbot of the monastery and brother of the Patriarch Cyrilos Loukaris.

39. Angarathos Monastery. The window of the refectory.

40. A monk's face. (Angarathos Monastery).

41. Relief carving at Angarathos.

icons, books and documents, to his island (Cythera) in time. Those valuables remained in Cythera for more than 300 years. Among them was the icon of Our Lady which the inhabitants of Cythera named "Our Lady Orphani" (the Orphan), signifying that the Virgin depicted on the icon was an orphan, as her monastery had already fallen into the Turks' hands. In 1970 the authorities of Cythera handed the valuables that had been salvaged back to the monks of Angarathos. Among them was the icon of Our Lady, who was no longer an orphan, being again in her monastery. The admirable icon is today kept inside the holy church.

The conquest of Crete by the Turks caused a lot of problems to the monastery. It is certain that they would have destroyed it and confiscated its property if the first Metropolitan of Crete, Neophytos Patelaros, hadn't intervened. The Turks didn't destroy the monastery, nevertheless they forbade its restoration. In those years the Metropolitan of Crete, Neophytos, settled at Angarathos. He was the first metropolitan of Crete after so many years (the Venetians had abolished the orthodox sees). The following years were difficult. The taxes imposed by the conquerors were heavy and the oppression was unbearable. Yet, Angarathos kept on functioning with a considerable number of anchorites, who worked in the farms, while very few of them could any longer become educated. Angarathos of that time didn't remind one the least of the former educational and cultural center, although it is apparent that the monastery had supported the revolutionary movements and the fighters for Cretan freedom.

In the 1821 revolution the Turks slaughtered the monks and set fire to the buildings, most of which were destroyed. The monastery remained deserted for many years. After the end of the revolution the monks who had survived the slaughter settled there again. The monks had apparently expected the disaster of the year 1821. That's why they had hidden the sanctuary lamps and other sacred vessels into a cave. Unfortunately, the monk who had hidden them was butchered by the conquerors and nobody could find them. 150 years had passed when a shepherd-monk of the community of Angarathos found a sanctuary lamp in a cave!



During the final decades of the Turkish rule Angarathos started to regain its former splendour. After 1860 a school was opened there, at which children from the neighbouring villages were educated. The Turkish domination had begun to be milder...

The Cretans revolted again in 1866 in pursuit of their freedom. Angarathos became the raiding-base of a great Cretan hero, Tryphitos, who was killed near the monastery. His talisman and other heirlooms of his are today kept in the monastery.

In 1894 the church was re-erected. The Turkish rule ended in 1898 and a new period opened for Crete and its monasteries. Angarathos is among those monasteries that survived and have been preserved up to our days. In recent years monasticism has gained a new, more spiritual dimension and Angarathos has attracted young educated monks, university graduates and others who have helped the monastery gain its former status.

The visitor can have a look at the surviving parts of the old monastery, the holy church with the contemporary wall paintings, which depict Cretan saints, as well as at the





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42. The now deserted Monastery of Kera Limniotissa at Episcopi.

pomegranate-tree of Angarathos. It is a small tree which has sprung up in front of the sanctuary and the monks have always been lighting a lamp at its trunk. Tradition reports that the icon of Our Lady was found under this tree and the monastery was built owing to that event. It is said that it was originally a bush but the first monks grafted it into a pomegranate-tree - despite the rules of nature - and the graft was valid. The tree has been regarded as sacred ever since. I believe that it is a survival of the sacred trees which existed on Crete in pre-Christian times.

## THE OTHER MONASTERIES

In the vicinity of Angarathos a lot of monasteries had existed in the Middle Ages, which became inactive and desolate in the early years of the Turkish conquest. The monastery of Kera Limniotissa is a typical example. It is situated in the rural area of the village of Episcopi and nothing has remained today but its roofless church. It's worth admiring that

43. The dome of Kera Limniotissa fell down long ago. The pilgrim feels closer to heaven...

small cruciform church which preserves sections of its wall decoration on two layers (it has been painted twice). The dome has fallen down and there is a round opening in the roof which inspires an awe, as looking up from inside the deserted church one has the feeling that the clouds come to rest on the roof!

Near the village of Episcopi there exist the remains of other monasteries, such as those of Aghios Georghios, Christ and Aghia Triatha (Holy Trinity). Out of all, one should better visit the old monastery of Aghios Georghios, near the football ground of the village. It lies on a rocky eminence densely planted with pine and other trees. Especially in Spring, the landscape with the flowered weeds is fascinating. The church is painted and ruins of the living quarters lie around it. Evidently when the monastery was dissolved the monks moved to Angarathos and this is the reason why until lately the church and the area had belonged to the monastery of Angarathos. It was most probably destroyed in the early years of the Turkish occupation.

Besides the vestiges of the old monasteries, one can also visit some churches at the village of Episcopi with wall paintings representing the trends of the time which led to the great Cretan School of the Renaissance. The church of Saint Paraskevi is the most characteristic of them all. On its arch there are frescoes with scenes from the life of the Saint, while on the depictions of the Second Advent, the Inferno and the figures of the soldiers in the scenes of Saint Paraskevi's martyrdom one can detect the western influence on the Orthodox iconography.

The monastery of Kyria Eleoussa (Our Lady the Merciful) is situated near the village of Voritsi (there is a detour of the road Heraklion - Aghios Nikolaos leading to it in the area of Gouves, 20 kms from Heraklion). Voritsi is 25 kms distant from Heraklion. That monastery was a dependency of Angarathos, too, but today it is deserted. It is built on the top of a hill and predominates over the area like an old castle. The view to the sea is fascinating.

It's an old monastery, although the exact date of its founding is unknown. The surviving fortress was constructed in the final years of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the opening years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Before the Turkish conquest it had owned a famous icon of the Virgin Mary which was transferred to the Ionian islands (during the war against the Turks) and is still there.

The ruined building constitutes a typical example of monasterial architecture according to which every kind of activity was centred inside the surrounding wall of the monastery (living quarters, cisterns, storehouses, stables, etc.) On the eastern side of the building one can even today see the old loopholes which served to repel the piratical assaults.

### MONASTERY OF SAINT JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN AT ANOPOLIS

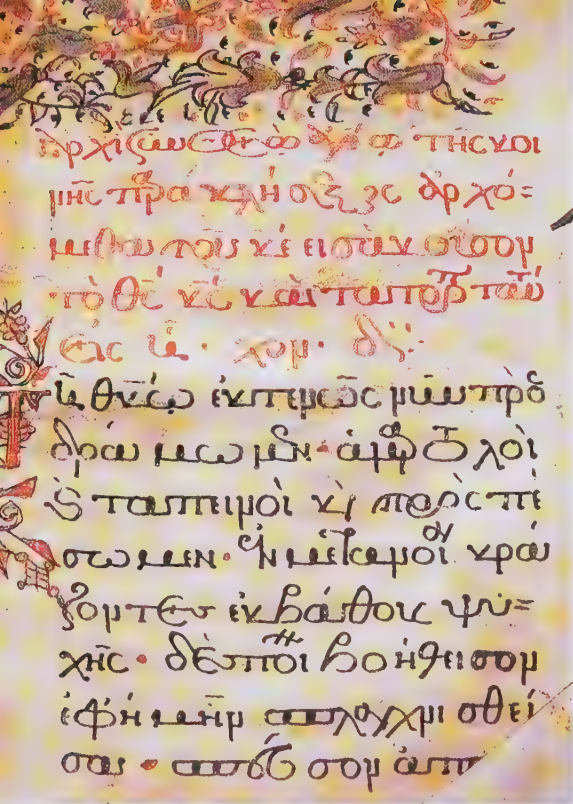
The monastery of Saint John the Theologian is situated near the village of Anopolis, 17 kms to the east of Heraklion (there is a road branch from the settlement of Kokkini Chani). It is "hidden" in a fortified area, behind a low mountainside and is connected with the village of Anopolis by a passable earth-road, 700 metres long.

It is an old monastery. It has been functioning since the time of the Venetian



rule. Tradition reports that it was founded by the anchorites of the coastal monasteries who had taken a refuge there, due to the pirate raids. In all likelihood, however, the monastery had been in existence even earlier and monks from nearby monasteries had settled there in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest information about the monastery comes from the Turkish documents of the final years of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In those years it began to develop and acquire large estates through donations by the Christians. After the capture of Crete by the Turks almost the entire population of the neighbouring villages changed their faith and adopted Mohammedanism. The savage Janissaries who settled there caused frequent and serious problems to the monastery. They plundered the crops and terrorized the monks and by the time of the great Greek revolution in 1821 the monastery had almost entirely been almost entirely destroyed. The Turks incinerated and damaged most of its things. Fortunately, the monks had foreseen what was to befall on them and hid the old icons and the valuables into nearby caves thus saving them. Thanks to their





prudence, some very good icons have survived and are today kept in Heraklion, in the icon gallery of Saint Caterina's church. The monks' misfortunes continued even after 1821. In the 1866 uprising the monastery suffered appalling pillage and plunder of all its valuables by the Turks. When the revolution ended they gave them back to the monastery asking for money. Thus the monastery paid to get back things which had belonged to it.

It is among the first monasteries which founded and supported schools during the years of subjugation. The school of the monastery functioned around 1840. After 1862 it was the principal center of education in the area. In 1896, two years before the liberation of Crete, one of the most cruel events of the final years of the Turkish occupation took place in the region. The Turkish mob slaughtered 40 inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, among whom there were three monks. Evidence from those years reveals that the monks suffered inhuman tortures, one was burnt alive on the icons, a second was butchered like an animal! The monastery was deserted for many months.

After the liberation of Crete (1898) the monastery was reconstructed. Today the community comprises only three monks.

### KALLERGIS MONASTERY AT KASTELLI

It's a small monastery, 4 kms distant from Kastelli. Drive westwards and take the fork to the right at the football ground of the town. The road is passable. The monastery was founded near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a dependency of the likewise newly-established monastery of Vithiani which is on the Plateau. On the site of the Kallergis monastery there had stood another monastery which in all probability flourished during the final years of the Venetian rule, at the same time as other small monasteries in the region, like Aghios Georghios Rovithiotis (1.5 km from Kastelli), Aghios Georghios Atziparas (1.5 km to the east of Kastelli, close to the village of Diavai the) and Prophet Helias (2 kms to the east of Smari). Joseph Vryenius, representative of the Patriarchate when the Venetians forbade the presence of Orthodox Bishops on the island, dwelled in the latter

45 monastery during his stay on Crete. If one



happens to visit the old monastery of Prophet Helias, it's worth having a look at the water running from inside the sanctuary which is considered curative (holy water). It's also worth having a look at the chapel, 100 meters from the ruined monastery, with wonderful paintings which haven't as yet been restored by the archaeologists.

There is no evidence about the age of the monastery except for the Venetian domed buildings and the report of a writer who visited Crete in 1821 and wrote that an old tower stood on the site of the monastery. It was probably the defensive tower of the old monastery, which protected the monks in case of pirate raids. The other monasteries (Rovithiotis, Atziparas, Prophet Helias), are mentioned in either Byzantine or Venetian documents. Kallergis' monastery is consecrated to Saint John the Baptist whose celebration is on 7<sup>th</sup> January, when a nice local feast is held there. There is only one monk in the community today.

## CHURCHES

Some significant monuments still survive in the vicinity of the village of Kastelli, churches with beautiful wall decoration, which you can visit. At the village of **Bitzariano** there is Saint Panteleimon's church, which still has sections of its wall decoration. It's worth noticing the ancient capitals which the contemporary craftsman used for the construction of one of the church pillars.

To the west of Kastelli, at the small village of **Sklaverochori**, there still stands the frescoed church of Our Lady. It was painted in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and its decoration is preserved in a fairly good condition. Its frescoes are of a very high quality. They are actually considered to be the forerunners of the Cretan School of painting. On the northern wall there is a saint of the Catholic church with a rosary in the one hand and a religious book in the other. The penetration of elements from the Catholic church into the Orthodox religion was common in Venetian-held Crete. Most often, however, the opposite occurred. The Venetians adopted elements of the Orthodox church and many of them even changed their dogma.

The visit to the area of Kastelli gives one the chance to see some notable monuments of the

44. An old handwritten book. (Monastery of Anopolis).

45. Prochoros. Detail from an icon in the monastery of Anopolis. Today it is kept in St Caterina's church in Heraklion.

46. Wall painting from St Nikolaos' church at the village of Xithas.

47. St George Kephaliotis.



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region, such as the ancient town of Lyktos, near the villages of Xithas, Askoi and Kastamonitsa. That town had flourished in the Hellenistic and the Roman times. In the area of Lyktos there are the ruins of an early-Christian basilica (of the early Byzantine period). Saint George's church with wall paintings of the 14<sup>th</sup> century is standing in the area of the village of **Xithas**. One kilometre to the east of the same village, on the road to the village of **Kastamonitsa**, there is the frescoed church of Saint Nikolaos, with remarkable wall decoration. Of equal interest is the wall decoration of the Virgin's church at Kastamonitsa (it is the church of the graveyard today). This village has Byzantine roots, since it was founded after 961 by colonists who had come to Crete from the town of Kastamoni in Asia Minor. The settlement of Byzantine colonists on Crete soon after the Arab rule aimed at strengthening the Byzantine presence on the island. There are no Byzantine memories in that village any longer, except for the place-name "Saint Isithoros", where to all appearances a Byzantine church had stood. In the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the residents knocked down the beautiful Byzantine (and frescoed) church which was at the center of the village and erected a new one. The tradition preserved the memory of that church (cruciform with a dome) but there is no evidence as to whether it had been built soon after 961.

Between the villages of Kastamonitsa and Amariano there is the beautiful church of Saint George Kephaliotis with significant wall decoration.

## GOUVERNIOTISSA

The monastery of Gouverniotissa is situated a little higher up the village of Potamies, on a green hillside, 34 kms distant from Heraklion. Although the actual date of its founding is not known, it is certain that it had been in existence before the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Up to recent times it was a dependency of the Holy Sepulchre and owned extensive estates in the area of Potamies. Until the opening years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had functioned as a monastery dependency (metochi). There was a monk who came from the Holy Land and supervised the cultivation of the land.

Today it is deserted and there are remains of the cells, the old ovens and other buildings. The beautiful cruciform church is in a very



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48. The main church of the deserted Monastery of Gouverniotissa at the village of Potamies.

49. Wall painting from Gouverniotissa.

50. Monastery of Kera (Our Lady). (The photo has been taken by Roussetos Panayiotakis).

51. An angel. Wall painting from the Monastery of Kera.

good condition, but it remains locked. In order to visit it one has to ask for its attendant at the village of Potamies.

The most impressive feature of the church is its wall decoration. The frescoes date from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century and were painted by a good painter who was in direct contact with the artistic centres of the capital of the Byzantine State. The nice figure of the Pantocrator on the dome inspires an awe. His countenance is austere with wrinkles on the face and marked big eyes which are directed

to the right. Equally impressive is the figure of Saint Barbara, which is on the western side of the church, painted with vivid colours and shades. The main church of Gouverniotissa is one of the richest frescoed churches on Crete.

### MONASTERY OF KERA (OUR LADY)

The monastery of the Virgin Karthiotissa (Panaghia Kera), which lies on Mount Dicti and on the way up to the picturesque Plateau of Lassithi, is one of the most important centers of worship on Crete. Its annual celebration, on 8 September, is a top religious event in the area. The history of the monastery, the legends and the traditions related to the wonder-working icon of the Virgin Mary attract large numbers of worshippers even in our days. Is is 50 kms distant from Heraklion.

The monastery is old, although we don't exactly know when and by whom it was founded. The earliest mention of it appears in a text written by the Florentine monk Christopher Buondelmondi. He had come upon the monastery of the Virgin Karthiotissa on his way from the Plateau of Lassithi down to the valley and reported that the Virgin Karthiotissa had worked numberless miracles. Therefore, Panaghia Kera was a famous center of worship even in the old times. Of special importance was the portable icon of the Virgin Mary, which is no longer at Kera. A wine merchant, enchanted by the legend accompanying the icon, stole it and transferred it to Rome in 1498. The legend refers in detail to the trip from Crete to Italy. It relates that a storm blew up at sea and the wine merchant had to lighten his vessel by jettisoning his cargo into the sea so as not to sink. On arrival at Rome he decided to present the icon to the Apostle Mattheus' church, where it had been kept until 1866, when it was transferred to the church of Saint Alfonso on the Esquiline Hill. It is famous all over Italy even today and has given rise to the founding of the conventual Order of Our lady of Perpetual Succour, which in the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century numbered 4,000,000 monks all over the world. The residents in the vicinity of Kera believe that the ancient wonder-working icon of the Virgin Mary is the one now held on the iconostasis of the church. They believe that it was painted by Saint Lazarus and recount that the Turks had made three attempts to take it



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away from the church. They stole it, took it to Constantinople, but it escaped and went back to Kera. The third time, they decided to chain it on to a marble pillar. Nonetheless, the icon flew away at night taking both the chain and the marble pillar with it. The chain is today on the iconostasis of the church and the inhabitants render it wonder-working qualities. Many worshippers wrap themselves with the chain for a while to be relieved from illness or pain. The marble pillar is to be found in the yard of the monastery and the nuns of the community consider it a religious worship memendo. Unfortunately, the same icon was once again stolen a few years ago. A gang of youths stole the icon from inside the church in 1982. The devotees throughout Crete were



upset by the news, until the icon was discovered hidden at a nearby mountainside a few days later. They had failed to take it away... The police took it to Heraklion and delivered it to the Archbishopric. The event caused an immense stir and the Archbishopric of Crete decided to take the icon back to the monastery on foot. Thousands of people took part in the procession from Heraklion to Kera, a distance of 50 kms!

The monastery was fortified in earlier times. The defensive wall surrounded and protected the church, the monks' cells and the buildings of common use. However, the look of the monastery is no longer the same, due to the severe damage and incineration it suffered

throughout the duration of the Turkish rule, as well as due to the restoration works performed at times. It was the situation of the monastery that had necessitated its fortification. It lies on one of the natural passages leading to the Plateau of Lassithi. The Plateau was a revolutionary center throughout both the Venetian and the Turkish occupation and that's why the authorities had always tried to destroy it. From the first fortification works nothing has remained except for the lay-out of the monastic buildings. The entrance to the monastery is at the same place as in older times, that is at the eastern side of the establishment. The existing buildings which serve as the nuns' cells were built in the 1960's. The main



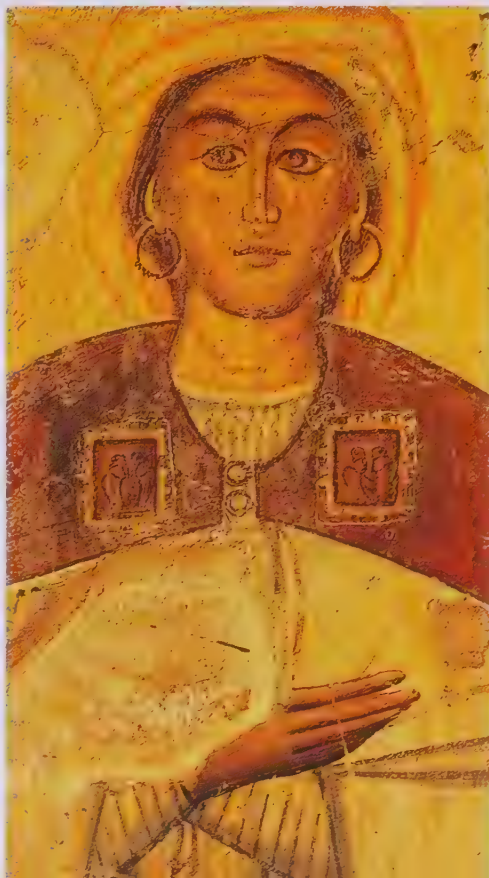


church of the monastery is notable. At first there was a small church on the spot. However, when the number of the worshippers and the monks increased, the church had to be extended. An arched rectangular building was added to the north of the church and three parallel arched buildings next to it. Moreover, a transverse arched narthex was later built at the western side. The wall decoration of the church is a characteristic example of art work of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century.

The history of the monastery of Kera is unknown. Since its earliest mention by Buondelmondi there has hardly been any other historical evidence. In the course of 15<sup>th</sup> century it was subject to the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople and possession of the (Orthodox) priest Pavlos Manganaris. That conflict, in all probability, led the Latins to steal the wonder-working icon. We refer specifically to the name of Manganaris, because the Manganaris family had had control over the monastery up to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century!

After the capture of Crete by the Turks (1669) the monastery played not only a religious but also a national role. It was a refuge for the revolutionaries and provided hospitality and food to the poor residents of the nearby villages. The nuns today show the place where a secret school is believed to have functioned, that is a school where the monks taught the Greek children rudiments of education secretly during the years of the Turkish subjugation. Since Kera was never inhabited by Turks (they preferred the flat fertile areas), it is highly probable that a special type of school had functioned at Kera. The monastery was evidently the artistic and religious center of the area, as it was the case with many other monasteries.

In 1822, one year after the outburst of the big Greek revolution, the monastery was burnt down by the Turks, and so was it again 20 years later, after the Cretan revolution of 1841. The monastery had then become a field of hard battles. In 1866, during the great Cretan revolution, Karthiotissa was the meeting-place



52. Monastery of Kera. The Sanctuary Doors.

53. A hierarch. The mural is in the sanctuary of Kera.

54. Monastery of Kera. Depiction of the patron, the woman who donated the rich wall decoration of the church.

55. The main church of the Monastery of Kera.



of the revolutionary committee. The monastery was burnt down once again.

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of monks decreased so much that the monastery faced the danger of being dissolved. It was then that the Archbishopric of Crete decided to convert it into a nunnery, thus saving it.

The visitor to the monastery of Kera can walk a little farther to the village of Kato Kera, which is almost desolate today. It's a typical Cretan village of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A short distance from there is the site of "Apotyposis". A short sloping earth-road leads to a landscape of extreme beauty dominated by high rocks, one of which has a human figure stamped on it. The inhabitants say that it is the figure of the Virgin. When the Muslim Turks had stolen the icon and it had flown back to Crete, the Virgin got tired on the way and stopped to rest at "Apotyposis". The figure of the Virgin was stamped on the surface of the rock upon which she had rested. The church of Theotokos was erected just next to it.

### MONASTERY OF VITHIANI

It lies on the Plateau of Lassithi, near the village of Kato Metochi. It was founded in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that time Crete was part of the Ottoman Empire and after successive bloody fights the Sultan had decided to allow the Cretans some kind of freedom, especially religious freedom. Until that time the Turks had forbidden not only the founding of new monasteries but also the restoration of the abandoned monastic centres. From 1856 to 1898, however, due to that decision, a great number of monasteries were founded or restored. Vithiani was one of them. An old church, or probably a monastery, had existed on its site. There is strong evidence in support of that conclusion. First of all, in a document dated 1846 there is mention of the place-name of "Panaghia Vithiano", at least ten years before the founding of the monastery. All the more, in 1968 a villager found a bell dated 1620 in a cave close to the monastery (100 metres from its entrance). The bell is today kept in the Historical Museum in Heraklion. That bell belonged to the church or to the old monastery of Vithiani (if it actually had the same name) and was hidden in the

cave in 1646, when the Turks took possession of Crete. The Cretans had hidden many bells in caves then, fearing the invaders might destroy them, as Islamism forbade the bells. Hieromonk Methodios Perakis was the founder of the monastery, who had been a teacher in the region of the Plateau before settling himself at Vithiani and starting to reconstruct the monastery out of the ruins. In those years there were no schools on the Turkish-held Plateau and the teaching took place secretly, inside churches and monasteries.

In 1866, the great Cretan revolution broke out. The monastery, the building of which had just been completed, was burnt and ruined. Shortly after the end of the revolution reconstruction works started again. The monastery soon won great fame and crowds of worshippers swarmed into it. Its flourishing continued till the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of its abbots, Thorotheos Tsangarakis, was distinguished as a great church and national personality and fought vigorously against the Nazis during the period of the latest misfortune of the island. He left the monastery and settled at the village of Vasilies, close to Heraklion. He had hidden the wireless transmitter with which he communicated with the free regions of the Mediterranean inside the church. Unfortunately, the Nazis discovered it and executed the heroic abbot.

After the liberation of Crete, the monastery began to decay and by 1968 it had been completely deserted. It remained abandoned for more than 25 years, until 1992, when it was restored, and Archimandrite Damaskinos Beleris became its abbot. There is a plan to establish a Museum of Physical History in the area of the monastery.

### MONASTERY OF KROUSTALLENIA

The situation of the monastery on an elevation of the plateau of Lassithi is very impressive and proves the theory that Greek monasteries are built on the most beautiful locations. The old monastery of Our Lady Kroustallenia lies on a huge rock which predominates over the plateau, surrounded by high mountains. It's not actually a bare rock, it doesn't remind one of the bare Meteora and their wild beauty. Although the rock of Krou-

stallenia stands out about fifteen meters from the level of the plateau, the huge grey-green trees that cover the area rooted on the same rock, make the altitudinal difference more noticeable.

Although the monastery is old, so far nobody knows who and when went up the idyllic hilly height of Kroustallenia to build it. However, the history of the monastery seems to be connected with the history of the Plateau itself. Lassithi is an area of captivating beauty, but its isolation makes it somehow reclusive and, in earlier times, impregnable. In the early Christian years it led its own religious life, which was forgotten in the maelstrom of adventures and vicissitudes of the area. After

Venetians gathered at Kroustallenia and prayed. This information proves that the monastery was in existence during the 2nd Byzantine period of Crete (961-1204). The date 1241 which is inscribed on an old relief carving is in accordance with this estimation.

The monastery of Kroustallenia was restored following the settlement of the Peloponnesian refugees on Crete. Among the refugees who came to Crete in mid 16<sup>th</sup> century were the Nuns Palandia and Theokliti. The former was the abbess of the Virgin of Spilaion convent and the latter was the abbess of Saint Pelaghia's convent of Castel dei Greci. It was them who revived monasticism on the Plateau. Palandia operated the monastery of Krou-



the conquest of Crete by the Venetians (1211) Lassithi became a revolutionary centre. The Venetians decided to lay it waste and forbade the Cretans not only to live on the Plateau but even to go up there and cultivate the fertile land. From 1293, when that decision was made, until 1543, when some refugees from Monemvasia and Nauplion in Peloponnese (those areas had meanwhile been captured by the Turks) settled at the deserted plateau, Lassithi was a forbidden area and if one dared to go there he was immediately persecuted. The old churches were demolished and so were the monasteries. Thus the folk memory was definitely lost. Historian Vasilios Psilakis asserts that in 1272 the revolted against the

stallenia and Theokliti the monastery of Aghia Pelaghia, which is today abandoned and deserted (only the church survives) and lies at the site of Alexena on the southern side of the Plateau. A new page had then opened in the history of the monastery, which continued to operate normally during the remainder of the Venetian rule.

Following the capture of the island by the Turks, Kroustallenia appears to be resided by monks. The Plateau became a raiding base for the revolutionaries again, like in the opening years of the Venetian occupation, and, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Kazanis was baptized at the monastery, the later famous chieftain. However, while the rite was taking



place, some Turks broke into the monastery and plundered it. The same occurred in 1823, when the damage was even greater. A. Fabreguettes, a French traveller, who visited the monastery in 1834, quotes that the two monks who were then in the community had not repaired the damage yet. The Egyptians, who had helped the Turks put down the 1821 big revolution in Crete, had plundered, butchered, raped and captivated women and children. Among the captives was Frangias Kambanis' son from the Plateau, who was taken to Cairo and was brought up as a Mohammedan. That was a tragic occurrence for the history of the Plateau. Young Kambanis was strong and clever and became a pasha (Ismail Ferik Pasha) and, what's more, minister of war in Egypt. In 1867, in particular, he was the head of the Egyptian army which burnt Lassithi (even his village) and destroyed the monastery of Kroustallenia! Things become more tragic if one meditates upon the fact that the Cretan revolutionaries were supported economically by Ismail's brother, Antonios, who in the meantime had made a great fortune in liberated Greece. After the disaster of 1867 Ismail was murdered (in fact he was poisoned) by the Turks, who believed that he carried memories of his childhood and that he was a Crypto-Christian.

In 1866 the monastery of Kroustallenia became the headquarters of the revolutionaries. At the same time it operated the first school on the Plateau. The destruction of 1867 distorted the architectural form of the monastery. The present-day buildings do not remind the least of their old look. Extensive work has evidently been done recently so that the establishment can remain inhabitable. Most of the buildings have been entirely rebuilt.

The monastery of Kroustallenia has always been one of the main places on the Plateau which were visited by foreign travellers. They had found accommodation and hospitality there. Today it is resided only by one monk.



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- 56. Monastery of Kroustallenia. The main church.
- 57. Relief carving at the Monastery of Kroustallenia.
- 58. Saint John. Icon from the convent of Spiliotissa.
- 59. Spiliotissa. The cavernous church.

## Heraklion - Monastery of Apanosiphis

**T**ake the main road Heraklion - Pediada and turn right at the 17<sup>th</sup> km, outside the Town Hall of Kazantzakis Municipality. You can also take the road Heraklion - Archanes (see Monuments at Archanes, pp 23-25) and from there follow the newly constructed road leading to the village of Chouthetsi. If you turn left, you will come upon the convent of Spiliotissa, close to the village of Aghios Vasilios. If you turn right, you will come upon the monastery of Apanosiphis at a distance of 9 kms from Spiliotissa. Whichever route you choose you will not regret it. They are both very interesting. From the monastery of Apanosiphis you can continue to the plain of Messara and the mountain range of Asteroussia, driving through the villages of Tepheli and Ligortynos.

### MONASTERY OF SPILIOTISSA AND THE REFERENCE TO ANDRONICUS PALAEOLOGUS

It is situated near the village of Aghios Vasilios at a distance of 22 kms from Heraklion (take the fork at the 17<sup>th</sup> km of the road Heraklion-Kastelli, Pediada). It is an old monastery built in an exotic dale, on a site full of religious memories. Enormous plane-trees and other trees conceal the monastery from the visitor's view if he is not aware of its existence. Very close to the monastery is the ancient simple-aisled church of Saint Ioannis with wonderful Byzantine wall paintings. The church was painted in 1291 and a part of the founder's inscription has survived, which is an excellent example of the maintenance of the Byzantine conscience in Venetian-held Crete. The painter and the patron of the wall decoration do not recognize the Venetian rulers of Crete but consider the Byzantine Emperor Andronicus Palaeologus as their king. The inscription states that the church "*was restored and painted in the reign of Andronicus Palaeologus*". The word "restored" leads to the conclusion that an older church had apparently existed on the spot.

Saint Ioannis' church lies at a distance of 300 meters away from the monastery and it is a fascinating experience to cover it on foot. Walking along the old road, among huge trees, one comes across the old fountain which supplied the monastery with water. The water of that spring is wonderful and was considered curative in earlier times. The Turkish Pashas



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of Heraklion were supplied with water exclusively from Spiliotissa!

The monastery (a nunnery today) is built on the hillside, while the main church is inside a cave. It is one of the many cavernous churches of the area which indicate special customs of worship and, most probably, of ancient worship. The cave of the monastery has been an important center of worship since Byzantine times. It had been frescoed before 1500 A.D. and vestiges of the wall decoration are to be seen even today. The word Spiliotissa is one of the adjectives attributed to the Virgin Mary and means the Virgin of the cave, that is, the Virgin worshipped inside the cave. The setting in the interior of the cave is mystagogic. The subdued lighting and the shades on the rock of the roof inspire a feeling of awe. The trembling light of the candles lends a mystic simplicity to the place and makes the sacred faces of the Saints look more austere.

The monastery was a bishopric see during the period of the Turkish domination. Today it

is a dependency of the big Sinai Monastery and is resided by two nuns who take care of it. The feast-day falls on 15 August (the Dormition).

### APANOSIPHIS MONASTERY

It is one of the biggest monasteries on Crete. It lies 32 kms away from Heraklion and is a typical example of a monastery which developed and grew in the course of the Turkish occupation. Before 1669 it had been small and of little importance. Another monastery, devastated today, was predominant over the area at that time: the monastery of Aistratigos (Michael the Archangel) at Agalandes.

The monastery of **Aistratigos** is sited near the village of Karkathiotissa, at a distance of 4.5 kms from Apanosiphis. Only the church is still surviving and very few buildings which serve as the shepherds' abode. However, wonderful Byzantine wall paintings are still to be seen on the walls. It is reported by the tradition that the church of Aistratigos was built by the Byzantine General and later Emperor Nicephorus Phocas, when he liberated Crete from the Arab Saracens in 961. Although there is no evidence in support of that point, still the wider area is related with the activity of the important Byzantine General. He had erected a fortress on the knoll of Roca and had made it his headquarters. The monastery was deserted during the early years of the Turkish dominion. A short time earlier, and more precisely in 1655, a plague broke out in Crete which killed the inhabitants of the nearby village of Agalandes. The houses of the village remained vacant, uninhabited, until they collapsed. Even till the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century their orchards had existed with fruit-bearing trees among the weeds. It's said that it was then that the monastery was devastated, although recent research has shown that this is not valid. There had been an abbot at the monastery at least till 1672. To all appearances it was deserted as a result of the decrease in the number of monks, which was due to the rapid development of the monastery of Apanosiphis, but also due to the Turkish

60. Saint George. Monastery of Apanosiphis.

61. An Evangelist. From a handwritten book of the Apanosiphis Monastery.





oppression (only the big monasteries could afford the heavy taxes imposed on them).

The amazing development rate of the Apanosiphis Monastery is basically due to the plague which broke out in 1655. Saint George was looked to as the protector of the native population from the terrible epidemic which killed thousands of people. Within a few years it became an important place of worship. The faithful donated both money and property to the Saint. Manuscripts of extreme importance containing hymns to Saint George Apanosiphis are still preserved in the monastery. By chanting those hymns the faithful prayed to the Saint to stamp the plague out and to put an end to the Turkish assaults which were a scourge for the area at that time. As one can imagine, the Turks who had camped outside Chandax for 22 years and made continuous efforts to capture the town, had very often plundered the nearby villages and monasteries; Apanosiphis was among them. The hymn to Saint George is a very important piece of writing. Besides the wonderful language, it includes historical information about that period.

The building structure is indicative of the time the monastery was constructed. It doesn't have the form of a fortress because, after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Cretan monasterial architecture had changed. Moreover, there was no longer the danger of piratical raids which had necessitated the fortification of the monasteries. Besides, fortification alone could not protect the monks from the then all-powerful Ottomans. The structure of the monastery reminds one of the popular Cretan architecture of that time, with self-contained cells, built next to each other. The refectory is, as usual, to the west of the church, near the abbot's quarters.

Tradition comes to fill the gap concerning the founding of the monastery. It reports that it was built by a travelling monk who had slept at the place where the church stands today. Additional traditions and legends lend metaphysical glamour to the monastery referring to miracles worked by Saint George. It is reported that a shepherd had asked Saint George for help promising to offer him the best rams of his flock. When the time had come to fulfil his vow he took some rams to the monastery but not the best ones. The following morning



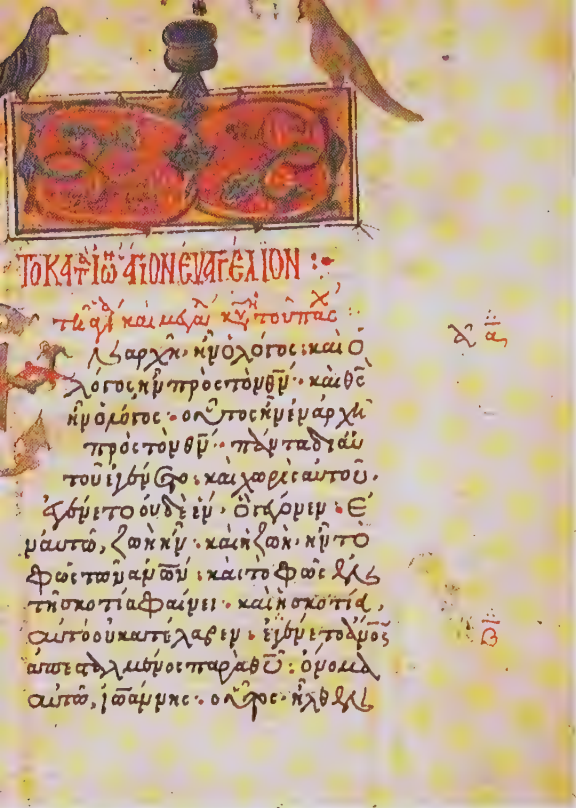
62. Marble sculpture from the Monastery of Apanosiphis.  
63. The calligrapher Monk Gavriel Mamougiorghis.

he saw all the animals of the flock going towards Apanosiphis by themselves.

The monastery experienced days of prosperity after the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After 1750 it became one of the most notable religious centers on the island. The manuscripts of that period are of specific importance and, apart from the text, they have very nice illustration. Such a manuscript ended up in London after





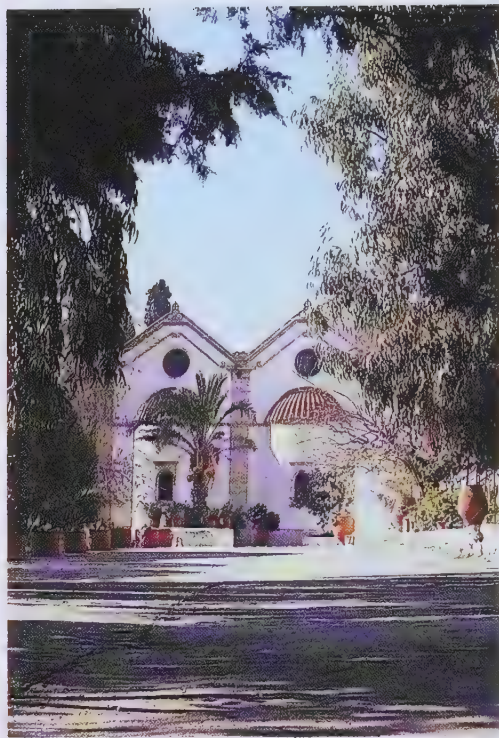


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the 1821 revolution. (Today it is at the British Museum). A second one is found in Heraklion, in the icon gallery of Saint Caterina's church, and several others are preserved in the monastery. A small museum of ecclesiastical art has recently been established there where the valuables of the monastery are protected.

The monastery played an important role in the 1821 uprising. The valuables, both gold and silver, were loaded on a ship and transported to the island of Hydra. There they were sold to raise money for the purchase of amunitions to support the fight for the liberation of Crete. Eighteen monks of the community of Apanosiphis were killed during that revolution. The monastery was devastated. The church was restored in the course of the Egyptian rule (1830-1840), when the calif of Egypt Mehmed Alis (Mohamed Ali) took liberal measures for the governing of Crete aiming at preventing uprisings and revolutions. Nevertheless, another Cretan revolution broke out very shortly, in 1866. The monastery was once more laid waste...

Throughout that period the monastery of Apanosiphis supported a large number of



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64. Handwritten book from the Monastery of Apanosiphis, impressively illustrated.

65. Apanosiphis Monastery. The main church.

schools with its immense property.

The large number of monks residing there today (and among them the calligrapher Gavriel Mamoughiorghis) constitutes an excellent example of survival of the Cretan monastic tradition.

## *To the Plain of Messara and the sacred places of the mountain range of Asteroussia*

It is a long trip, rich in experiences and impressions. Take the national road Heraklion - Moires - Tymbaki and visit the convent of Paliani, very close to the village of Venerato (fork to the left). From the village of Aghia Varvara turn right and drive to the beautiful monasteries of Vrontisi (close to Zaros) and Varsamonero (close to Vorizia). Both Vrontisi and Varsamonero are situated at the base of the mountain of Psiloreitis. If you continue this route, you can get to the plain of Messara through the villages of Zaros and Kapetaniana, without having to drive back to Aghia Varvara.

The plain of Messara and the mountain range of Asteroussia are both of exceptional importance, due to the great number of Christian monuments in the area (monasteries of Apezanes, Kalyviani, Hodeghitria, Kouthoumas) and the archaeological sites of Phaestos, Gortys and Aghia Triatha. You can easily find accommodation in the region of Messara, either along the coast or at several villages in the area. There is an earth, though passable, road from the village of Sivas to the monastery of Hodeghitria and the beach of Kali Limenes. Aghiopharango (Holy Gorge), a monument of nature, rich in memories from anchorites, can be visited only on foot.

The road to the coastal monastery of Kouthoumas is not very good. You'd better use a 4WD car to go there.

### **PALIANI CONVENT**

It is one of the oldest monasteries of Crete, as confirmed by the surviving architectural elements. These parts belonged to an early-Christian basilica which had stood at the same place since the early centuries of the establishment of the Christian religion on the island. The convent is situated in an area with profuse vegetation, close to the village of Venerato (fork to the left), 21.3 kms from Heraklion.

During the Byzantine period it was a patriarchal and imperial convent. It owned vast estates and metochia throughout most of central Crete. Its relationship with the Byzantine emperors and patriarchs had lent it unique glamour and power. Unfortunately, there is very little information about the convent during that period. No valuables, not any manuscripts have been preserved. Only tradition and the ruins evidence that anchorites and hermits had once lived in the nearby caves and in the wider area.

Substantial knowledge about the convent's

history starts from the time Crete was captured by the Venetians (1204/1211). The monastery found itself in the whirlpool of historical conjunctions. It was seized by the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople and, as it had been subject to the Byzantine Emperor till then, it was claimed by the Doge of Venice himself. That dispute lasted over many years, as manifested in a large number of documents preserved in the Venetian archives. It is proved by the Venetian censuses that Paliani continued to be operated by a female community throughout the duration of the Venetian rule. Following the seizure of Crete by the Turks (1669) the convents found themselves in a very difficult situation. There were frequent attacks against the nuns. There followed rapes, butcheries, defilement of sacred places, etc. That's the reason why very few nuns lived in Crete during the Turkish dominion and most of the convents experienced a violent and tragic end. Nonetheless, Paliani managed to survive till the 1821 uprising. Then, however, the savageness of the Turkish army manifested itself to its whole



extent. The convent was burnt down. The nuns dispersed and returned to their villages. The abbess was slaughtered after having been raped by "those who happened to be there", as recorded in a document of that time. Out of the nuns who were then living at the convent, only three survived. One of them, Parthenia, contrived to restore and reorganize the monastery. The convent was a pile of ruins. Living conditions were tough. The nuns relied upon donations by the faithful, while the Christians of Crete lived their own tragic life, with very little food and resources.

Near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new era commenced for the convent. Scores of nuns retired there. The period of prosperity lasted for many decades. Today Paliani is not a coenobitic but an idiorhythmic convent with a community comprising 50 nuns.

On the southern side of the main church there is a big tree, a centuries-old myrtle tree, which is called Holy Myrtia by the nuns and represents a startling survival of the worship of sacred trees, which had flourished in Crete during the Minoan period. That kind of worship was adapted to the Orthodox faith and can be seen at more than 50 parts of the island. As for the Holy Myrtia, it is believed that an icon of the Virgin is inside its trunk. The convent holds a celebration on 15<sup>th</sup> August, on Assumption day, but there is a special annual feast of Holy Myrtia on 23<sup>th</sup> September. The consecration of bread offerings under the sacred tree is a remarkable and devout event which connects the past Greek-Christian tradition with the present. An ancient pillar is used in place of the altar on which (and under the shade of the sacred tree) the consecration of the bread offerings takes place.

A few more monasteries had prospered in the neighbourhood of Paliani, such as the monastery of Stavromenos (the Crucified) close to the village of Avgeniki and the monastery of Theotokos on the banks of the river Apollo (a river that was named after the ancient god). Both of them are deserted today.

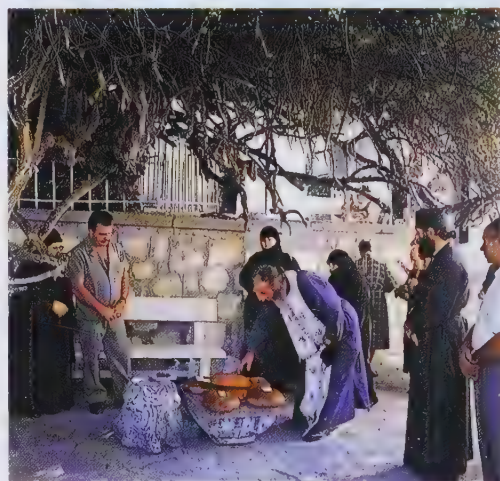
66. Prochoros. Wall painting from St John's church, Convent of Paliani.

67, 68. Under the Holy Myrtle. The worship of the tree constitutes survival of the Minoan customs of worship.

69. Saint Nikolaos. Mural painting from St John's church, Paliani.



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## MONASTERY OF VRONDISI - MONASTERY OF VALSAMONERON

They are both among the most important Cretan monasteries, as they were centres of education and arts in the period of Cretan Renaissance. Both of them lie on the eastern slopes of Mount Psiloreitis. Although the date of their founding is unknown today, they are undoubtedly very old monasteries. It's very likely that they had been active since the 2nd Byzantine period of Crete. The visitor to these monasteries has to follow the road Heraklion - Tymbaki and at the village of Aghia Varvara (29<sup>th</sup> km) take the fork to the right towards the villages of Zaros and Vorizia. The monastery of Vrontisi lies between Zaros and Vorizia (fork to the right), some 48.8 kms from Heraklion. The monastery of Varsamoneron is situated in a rural area of the village of Vorizia, 54.5 kms from Heraklion.

Vrontisi is consecrated to Saint Antony, the patron of hermits, and celebrates on 17 January. The monastery continues to be impressive despite the fact that it has lost part of its aesthetic appearance, due to the demolition of the old fortifications and the erection of new buildings on their site. Before passing through the main entrance, one comes across the fountain of the monastery with the relief carvings. It is a wonderful piece of work, a remnant from the period of the monastery's flourishing. Water runs through the mouth of sculpted lion heads. Just next to them stands the enormous plane-tree of Vrontisi with a large hollowness in its trunk. The gate is relatively new. On its interior side, however, one can see the remains of the old gate (main entrance) of the monastery.

The main church has retained its old glamour. It's a double-aisled church (the second aisle is dedicated to the Apostle Thomas). It's worth having a look at the bell-tower. It reminds one of a Catholic church. This is explained by the fact that it was built in the course of the Venetian rule, when one Christian dogma influenced the other, as Orthodox and Catholic Christians lived together on the island. Such bell-towers, separated from the church, survive in other churches of Crete, too. On the walls of the southern aisle there are remains of the beautiful wall decoration. The figure of Saint Symeon Theodochos (Bearer of God), holding



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the Holy Infant in his arms, is noteworthy. The visitor should reflect on the learned clergymen and venerable monks who served as abbots or were members of the monastery's community. Vrontisi was famous during the closing centuries of the Venetian occupation for its monks' performance in letters and arts. Manuscript copyists, painters and teachers, renowned even beyond the borders of Crete, had belonged to its community. At Vrontisi, and for the benefit of it, Michael Damaskinos, one of the most important religious painters of Cretan Renaissance, painted six of his most famous and most representative icons. Those icons had been kept in the monastery of Vrontisi till 1800. In that year the Metropolitan of Crete, Gerasimos, transferred them to Heraklion and hung them on the walls of Saint Minas' cathedral. Today they are in the icon gallery of Saint Caterina's church in Heraklion.

The flourishing and the glamour of the monastery continued during the years to come. The darkness that followed the Turkish conquest obliterated the prime expressions of



Cretan civilization. Vrontisi began to fall into decay after 1669, when every hope to repulse the Muslim invader had faded. The wall paintings, the portable icons, the old manuscripts, the splendid buildings were the only evidence of the cultural flourishing and the past glory of Vrontisi. The darkness brought about illiteracy. The Turkish oppression brought about devastation. There were but a few monks, who didn't hesitate to shelter the fighters for Cretan freedom. The old books, valuable witnesses of the past, had been kept inside large boxes. Until they, too, were lost...

The monastery had been a refuge for two great Cretan fighters: captain Michalis Korakas and the Crypto-Christian Michalis Kourmoulis. It suffered grave damage and devastation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today it is resided by two monks.

The monastery of **Varsamoneron** is deserted today. In order to visit it one has to be escorted by its attendant who lives in the village of Vorizia. There are no cells today, although traces of them are still to be seen, such as some ruins, a stone staircase etc. The church is one of the most important Christian monuments of Crete, not only because of its peculiar architectural style and the beautiful sculpted door-frame, but -principally- because of its wall decoration. These wall paintings prove that the monastery had been a center for the spreading of new artistic currents since at least the final decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Theotokos Hodeghitria, who was named after the Byzantine convent of Constantinople, Aghios Phanourios and Aghios Ioannis are honoured at the monastery. In the period of the Venetian rule it was more widely known as Hodeghitria monastery of Varsamoneron. Today it is known as Saint Phanourios' church. The main church is a twin arched church with a transverse aisle and a narthex. They are successive extensions to the original building. That is, when the number of the pilgrims and the monks increased, the church was extended. The northern aisle, which is dedicated to the Virgin, is its oldest part. Its wall paintings date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The icons of the Virgin, as well as of the two Saints with the long parchments at the front of the recess, are typical examples of the painting of that time. It is worth having a look at the



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figure of Saint Ioannis Damaskinos, with the turban, at the figure of Saint Onouphrios with the long beard, as well as at the Dormition of Theotokos on the northern wall of the same aisle.

The southern aisle, which is dedicated to Saint John the Baptist, has a lot of notable wall paintings on the southern wall, such as scenes from Christ's Passion (Entry into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, Judah's Betrayal). The depictions of Crucifixion and Epitaphios predominate over the northern wall. The arch and the eastern part of the same aisle were painted in 1400/1407. The western part was painted in 1428.

The transverse aisle, that is Aghios

Phanourios' aisle, was painted in 1431. All these depictions constitute an important sample of the art of the early Venetian period.

Apart from the rich wall decoration, the monastery held portable icons of the eminent painter Angelos. The carved wooden iconostasis was an excellent sample of ecclesiastical woodcarving, as is the lectern, too, which is kept in the Historical Museum of Crete in Heraklion.

Regarding the history of Varsamoneron, it is known that it was a large monastery with lots of dependencies (metochia) and learned monks. During the Venetian occupation a school had functioned there. The library of the monastery contained an impressive number of books, among which -as it appears in a catalogue of 1644- there were philosophical texts and texts by ancient writers, such as Xenophon, Aeschines, Plutarch and others.

The decline of the monastery started in the early years of the Turkish dominion. By mid 17th or 18th century it had been deserted.



70. 71. Details from the frescoes of the Monastery of Varsamoneron.  
 72. Varsamoneron. The bell tower.  
 73. Varsamoneron. View of the church. The cells of the monastery are not extant today.







74. Varsamoneron. Mural. (*The Society of the Angels*).  
 75. The Monastery of St Nikolas at Zaros, at the entrance of a picturesque ravine.  
 76. The Last Supper. Icon credited to Michael Damaskinos. Until 1800 it was at the Monastery of Vrontisi, together with the other icons of the same painter.

#### The monastery of **AGHIOS NIKOLAOS**.

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It lies close to the village of Zaros, in an idyllic area, where the ravine leading to the forest of Rouvas starts. It's an old monastery with a church rich in wall decoration, deserted until recently when monks, followers of the old calendar, settled there.

Above the monastery, on a precipitous mountainside, there is the cave of Saint Euthymios, an old hermitage which you can reach after a 20 minutes' ascent on a narrow and steep path. It's worth taking this walk. You'll enjoy the wild nature and the rich vegetation and you'll see a cavernous church inside which two beautiful wall paintings have survived. An anchorite is said to have resided there, living only on vegetables and roots. The nuns from the community of Aghios Nikolaos saw him one dark night in their garden, took him for a wild animal and injured him to death either with a bow or with a bullet. Although he lived very close to them, they had never seen him before because the hermit had held himself from being seen during the day.

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Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΠΝΕΥΜΑΤΙΣ

ΑΝΘΡΩΠΩΝ ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ ΔΙΕΚΟΝΗΤΩΝ ΤΩΝ ΧΑΡΙΤΕΡΩΝ  
ΑΥΤΗΣ ΤΗΣ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣ ΚΑΘΩΣ ΤΕΛΕΝΤΑΙ ΔΥΝΑΜΙΣ





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77. The finding of the icon of Panaghia Kalyviani around the middle of the 19th century became the cause of tension between the Cretans and the Turks. Mattheus Michelinakis (on the photo in the traditional Cretan costume) was one of the people who tried hard so that the church would be ceded to the Christians.

78. View of the three churches at Kalyviani.

79. Christ. Fresco from the old church at Kalyviani.

80. Theotokos Hodeghitria. Museum of Kalyviani.

## CONVENT OF KALYVIANI

Kalyviani constitutes a unique example of convent which has identified faith and worship with social offer and charity. It lies in the area of Kalyvia in Messara, close to Mires, 59.5 kms from Heraklion (there is a deviation to the right, less than 500 meters long, at the 59<sup>th</sup> km of the national road Heraklion - Tymbaki).

The establishments have been constructed recently and remind one of a peaceful village with vegetation, flowers and modern buildings. This particularity is due to the fact that the erection of this convent began after 1960 in a region rich in monastic and religious memories. Another convent stood at this site many centuries ago. Its traces, however, have been lost in time and by mid 19<sup>th</sup> century nothing else but a humble desolate church, some ruined buildings and a few weedy graves had existed there. The old unknown convent was active in the Venetian times and most probably the date of its founding goes back to the Byzantine period. The only surviving evidence which can prove the age of the religious establishment is the old church and its wall paintings dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. A few old graves are still to be seen inside the church. The anchorites used to bury the dead within the holy churches so that they would eternally be in the devout environment within which they had spent almost all their life. Those graves undoubtedly betray the monastic past of the area. Moreover, a considerable number of graves were found around the small domed church of Kalyviani, dug in the soil. The present-day nuns have preserved two such graves, which constitute irrefutable evidence of an unknown past. The visitor can see them inside the small church of Holy Charalambis. This church was built only a few years ago, within the surrounding wall, in honour of a local saint who lived at Kalyviani during the Turkish occupation.

Regarding the old monastery which had functioned at Kalyviani, there exists neither evidence nor documentation. Neither its name nor the number of the anchorites is known. Its traces were lost when it was destroyed by time or by some barbaric assault. The research I've conducted in the area makes me believe that the old monastery was destroyed when the Turks attacked and captured the region, in 1646. There is no other explanation of the fact

that the whole district around Kalyviani was owned by Turks.

After the disaster of 1646 the Turks seized the surrounding land, except for the church, which continued to function at rare intervals and occasionally the old cells roofed solitary anchorites. Until 1821 the Turks had not harmed the church. In that year, however, the Cretans revolted and fought vigorously and stubbornly to gain their freedom. The revenge was bloody. The conquerors destroyed whole villages, slaughtered thousands of revolutionaries and non-combatants alike and burnt down monasteries and churches. The history of Kalyviani as a church and a place of worship was interrupted in 1821. Since then and until 1865 it was deserted. The neighbouring Turks used the church as a stable for their animals. In 1865, one year before the new big revolution, the Christians found an old icon of the Virgin inside the church. The event moved the subjugated Cretans deeply. The icon was considered miraculous and thousands of worshippers streamed into the small church from every part of Crete to worship the Virgin. This incident did not please the Turks at all. They obliged the people, even the patients, to stay under the burning summer sun for long hours, forbidding them even to stand under the high olive-trees of the region. However, the longer the prohibitions lasted the more worshippers congregated at Kalyviani! The inhabitants of the district decided to build a few small rooms where the travelling patients, who had come either on foot or on their animals from a long distance, could rest. The Turks wouldn't allow that either. Discussions started with the representatives of the great powers of the time. The consuls of the European countries and Orthodox Russia decided in favour of the Christians. The conflict concerning Kalyviani eventually resulted in the removal of the Turkish Governor of Heraklion and the problem found its solution after long disputes.

Kalyviani continued to be a famous place of worship. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the church was too small to hold such crowds of worshippers. The monk superintending the church resolved to have a second large and splendid church built next to the old one. It is the present-day big church of Theotokos where the valuable keepsake of the



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convent is kept, that is, the old icon which was found in 1865. It is to be seen on a special icon-stand, to the right of the entrance to the church. In 1957, the new -then- Metropolitan of the district, Timotheos, wanted to give a fresh impetus to Kalyviani. He had buildings constructed and started establishing nuns there. Within a few years the number of the nuns had increased so much that Kalyviani became a big convent, one of the biggest on Crete. Besides the cells, a school, an orphanage, an old people's home, a weaving and needlecraft workshop and a printing press for the production of ecclesiastical magazines and books were built. The founder of the convent became the Archbishop of Crete in 1978. The contribution of the convent is continued by his successor, Cyrilos.

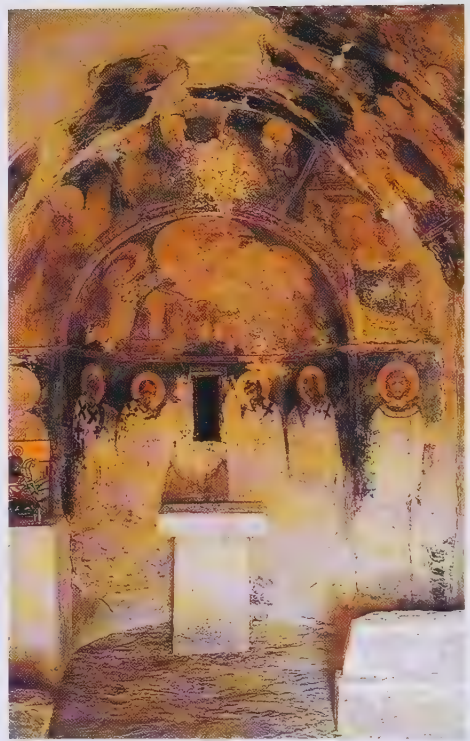
In the recent years the Archimandrite and priest of the convent Nektarios Paterakis has established a museum of ecclesiastical and popular art within the convent. The visitor to the museum can see rare items collected with much love and hard work: Byzantine icons, sacred vessels, woodcarvings, objects of popular art, old handwoven items, vestments, Cretan costumes, etc.

The feast day of the convent falls on 15 August. Even today it is one of the most important religious centres on Crete.

Two old monasteries, deserted today, lie close to Kalyviani. The first, the **Virgin Karthiotissa**, (of the heart) is situated near the village of Vori and its church has fine wall paintings. Ruins of the cells are still extant.

The second lies at the entrance to the archaeological site of Phaestos. It's named **Aghios Georghios of Flandra** or Falandra and was destroyed by the Turks during the 1821 revolution. As proved in our two-volume work "Monasteries and Hermitages of Crete", the monastery was originally founded by Saint Ioannis Xenos, an important local saint who was active in Crete after 961.

The traveller to Phaestos should not neglect visiting the nearby village of Aghios Ioannis where **Saint Paul's** church is still standing. It is a beautiful church dating from the 14th century with a dome and interesting wall paintings depicting the Punishment of the Damned. The paintings date back to 1303-1304. An old Christian baptistry had existed



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on the site of the present-day church.

The founder's plaque is on the base of the dome, where one can read the name of the dedicatory Petros (S)oulis and the names of the Byzantine Emperors Andronicus Palaeologus, Irene the Momferat and their son Michael. The visitor can also see the beautiful portraits of the Evangelists and be deeply touched by the visit to a place where the memories from the remotest antiquity (remnants of the Minoan palace stand out just on the opposite side) meet with the oldest Christian piece of evidence.

From Phaestos one can drive to the south. The frescoed church of **Saint George Galatas** stands at the archaeological site of Aghia Triatha. It has an inscription dated 1302 and is one of the oldest frescoed churches on Crete. An older church had stood on the site, as indicated by the existing traces of the foundation. On the northern wall, outside the church, there is a grave with an arched recess, a plaque with a Byzantine double-headed eagle in relief and an inscription bearing the date 1581.



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81. The sanctuary of the church of the Holy Trinity, at the archaeological site of Aghia Triatha.

82. The monastery of Karthiotissa at the village of Vori.

83. St Paul's church at the village of Aghios Ioannis, Messara. It was built on the site of an old baptistry.

84. The church of the Holy Trinity. (Archaeological site of Aghia Triatha).

85, 86. Church of the Holy Trinity. Details from the wall paintings.





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## MONASTERY OF HODEGHITRIA

It's an important monastery, the history of which incorporates the history of many small monasteries and hermitages of the district. It lies at a distance of 70 kms from Heraklion. Take the fork to the left at the 61st km of the road Heraklion - Matala and pass through the village of Sivas whence an earth-road, 8 kms long, leads to the monastery. The traveller wishing to visit the monuments of the district can continue from Phaestos and Aghios Ioannis until the fork to Sivas and drive towards Hodeghitria from there.

The site of Hodeghitria looks like a biblical scenery. It's dry and barren, without settlements and large villages. An area absolutely favourable for monastic tranquility and solitude. There are many Byzantine monuments in the area, but only earth-roads and paths scraped by the rain lead to them. Very close to the monastery, at a distance of only one kilometre, lies the church of **Saint Ioannis at Langos**, with interesting wall-paintings, among which is a beautiful portrait of Saint John the Baptist, on the southern wall of the simple-aisled church.

On entering the yard of the monastery one can see the holy church of Theotokos in front of his eyes and a big defensive tower to the left, which predominates over the whole area. There were such towers in the isolated medieval monasteries for the monks to barricade themselves inside and be protected from hostile attacks. Over its gateway there is part of an old hole which had the name



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87. Monastery of Hodeghitria, Messara. The fortified tower.  
Photo: John Froutharakis.

88. Figure of a monk. Hodeghitria, Messara.

89. Saint Phanourios, detail from an icon of the 15th century.  
Today it is kept in St Caterina's church, Heraklion.

90. Saint John the Baptist. Wall painting from St John's church at Langos, very close to the Monastery of Hodeghitria, which it belongs to.

"killer" or "katahytra". If the invader tried to go near the gate and force his way through it, the monks in defence would pour scalding oil or lead from above and the tower remained unas-sailable. The tower of Hodeghitria indicates the importance of the monastery in older times and especially due to its location in an almost uninhabited area.



The church is of a peculiar type with successive extensions to the original building. There are wall paintings on the southern side of the small old church. However, the wall decoration has not been cleared or completely uncovered yet. One painting depicts Theotokos holding the Holy Infant and little Christ has his hand on her lips. Tradition reports that sometime pirates were going to plunder a monastery. The Virgin depicted on an icon of the iconostasis opened her mouth to shout and warn the monks. Christ, however, who knew that those monks were not abiding according to the rules of monastic life, put out his arm and shut her mouth so that she couldn't shout. Such legends are heard throughout Greece but here, in southern Crete, the legends convey something from the mystery of the past.

At the southern side of the church, just off the entrance, one can see the traces of another aisle and inside it a grave covered with a relief slab. It is not known who Aloisios Trivizanos was, who, as mentioned on the inscription, was buried there. It is, however, known that the today ruined aisle was dedicated to Saint Phanourios.

The monastery of Hodeghitria was the center of the diffusion of the artistic currents that reached Crete from Constantinople. The wall paintings of its chapels and the nearby churches are noteworthy and cover a wide chronological spectrum (different times of painting). The monastery is old. Its dependency at the site of Aghious (3-4 kms distant from the monastery) had been an old independent monastery founded by Saint Ioannis Xenos after 961 A.D. He had been born in the nearby village of Sivas, had founded many monasteries on Crete, was a man of broad perception and education and had relations even with the Emperor of Byzantium himself. He had founded a monastery at Aghious in order to honour three local saints who had been active in the region. Today a cavernous church and the ruins of a few buildings exist on the site of the old monastery.

The monastery of Hodeghitria played a leading role in the period of the Turkish occupation. It sheltered revolutionaries and guerrillas. Prior to 1821 it had been ruled by a forceful monk, Ioasaph. That monk had the Gospel-book in the one hand and the gun in







the other. He was one of the most important Cretan heroes. He had fought ceaselessly on the mountains. In 1828 the Turks sent out a whole army to kill him. Ioasaph barricaded himself within the tower of the monastery and fought bravely. He killed lots of enemies and when he had run out of amunitions, he went down to the yard fighting with his sword. He was finally killed and the monastery was destroyed.

The national contribution of Hodeghitria continued throughout the whole period of the Turkish rule. Today it is a spiritual monastery resided by two monks.

### AGHIOPHARANGON - HERMITAGES

After the visit to Hodeghitria we suggest that you should continue the earth-road to Kali Limenes and, about three kms farther on, get off the car and endeavour a walk to visit one of the most sacred places of Crete. It is a ravine, which starts from the right side of the earth-road and goes down to the Libyan coast. Even in winter time you can see the local swallows which feel content with the mild climate and never emigrate! The old monks used to say that the swallows were the souls of the anchorites of Aghiopharangon. It takes about 45 minutes to get to the coast on foot and twice as long to go back. The ravine is smooth at first but becomes more precipitous farther on. There are caves everywhere, in which hermits, people who had submitted themselves to want and had devoted their lives to praying, lived from the Byzantine period till the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some of those caves are accessible and others are inside steep rocks. It's said that hermits had dwelled even in those caves. Shortly before arriving at the exit of the ravine one comes across the marvellous church of Saint Antonios. It is a domed church, which in all probability was built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. One can admire its architectural style and the building technique. The sanctuary is part of a small cave. It had wall paintings in the past but they haven't survived. Next to the church there is the cell of the last hermits. A little farther down, on the left side of the ravine, there is a large cave named "Goumenospilios" (the abbot's cave). If there is no guide familiar with the area, the visitor going there for the first time will have difficulty in locating it. Its



91. Aghiopharangon. A tree-hermit in the ravine of the ascetics and the saints.

92. Zoodochos Pighi (Life-giving Source). Icon of the painter Angelos (15<sup>th</sup> century).





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93. Wall painting from St Ioannis' church, Hodeghitria.

94. Theotokos Gorgoepeikoos. A frescoed church, the main church of an old monastery close to Kali Limenes.

entrance is low, but once you pass through it, you feel the awe inspired by the local traditions. The cave, a place of ancient worship, is lighted by a hole on the roof. It's said that the 300 hermits of the region gathered in this cave once or twice yearly. Only then did they know whether someone had died since their last meeting.

### MONASTERY OF APEZANES

One more important monastery of Crete with significant contribution to art and civilization. It lies some 63.3 kms from Heraklion. In order to get there follow the road Heraklion - Tymbaki and at Gortys take the fork to the left towards the villages of Platanos and Plora and from there continue to the monastery of Apezanes.

The monastery is surrounded by trees, but it hasn't preserved all its architectural features. It had the look of a fortress with a defensive tower, remnants of which are still visible, while its biggest part has been ruined. One can see the old vaulted gateway at the northern side of the establishment. The church of Saint Antonios (feast-day on 17 January) is a building of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The visitor can also visit the nearby chapel of Aghia Paraskevi, at a distance of 2-3 kms from the monastery. There had been a small independent monastery at the site in older times. Today an enormous tree dominates over the area, an oak-tree, which is believed to have therapeutic effects. This is another case of the survival of tree culture. The icon of Saint Paraskevi is continually on its trunk and the worshippers often burn incense under the tree. The faithful take to the tree to be cured from various diseases.

The monastery of Apezanes is centuries-old. During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries it was center of arts and education. It operated its own school and a great many of the literate anchorites of Crete had excelled as monks and abbots there. It's said that the renowned Patriarch of Alexandria, Meletios Pigas, had been a monk at Apezanes. When Meletios Pigas was the Patriarch in Alexandria he was in correspondence with the abbot of Apezanes, Arsenios Maritzis.

The Venetian physician Onorio Belli visited the monastery in 1586 and praised the kindness of the monks, relating that the

monastery had a very good income and the best wine in the world!

After the capture of Crete by the Turks, the monastery began to fall in decay. The educated monks and the brilliant church personalities had gone and with them the religious life and the contribution of the monastery to arts and letters had vanished. However, the old -useless any longer- manuscripts were still in its library. The wealth of the library is unknown, although it is known from different sources that travellers and other people had tried during the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century to acquire part of the spiritual treasures of Apezanes. The monastery has a rich library even today in which old manuscripts are still preserved.

## MONASTERY OF KOUTHOMAS

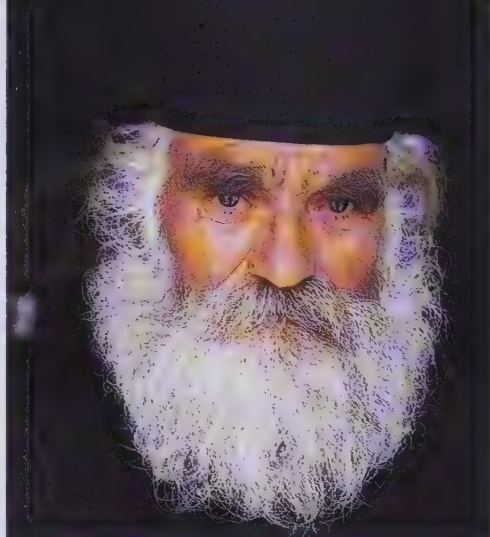
The monastery of Kouthoumas is built at a beautiful bay on the southern coast of Crete, among hermits' caves and memories from Orthodox saints. The access to the region is difficult. The visitor has to follow the road Heraklion - Tymbaki, turn to the left at the 44<sup>th</sup> km, drive to the villages of Platanos - Plora - Sternes past the village of Aghii Deca and from there take a rough earth-road which ascends to the Asteroussia mountains and then descends to the shore of Kouthoumas. You 'd better drive a 4WD car on this road. There was no passable road to Kouthoumas a few years ago and the visitors would go there either on foot or by boat from Kali Limenes.











Lots of monasteries and hermitages have existed in the region since the Byzantine years. However, the present monastery was built in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the site of it there had been only ruins from a forgotten monastery, the name of which as well as the honoured saint are unknown. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century there was actually a monastery of Kouthoumas in the area, but whether it stood on the site of the present-day monastery or somewhere near it, we don't know.

Holy Parthenios and Eumenios, two eminent Cretan monks, who have been recognized as saints because of their virtues and their actions, are the founders of the monastery. They built it after 1870 having wandered for some time on the south coast, in search of a place appropriate for worship. Their fame spread all over Crete very rapidly and many monks and worshippers began to flock at Kouthoumas. It was then that the main church was built, together with most of the cells in

95. Section of the wall decoration of St Nikitas' cavernous church at Marithaki, close to the village of Achendrias. Until the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was occupied by hermits.

96. Christ. Portable icon from Theotokos' church (Gorgoepikoos). Today it is kept in St Caterina's church, Heraklion.

97. Monk from the Monastery of Apezanes.

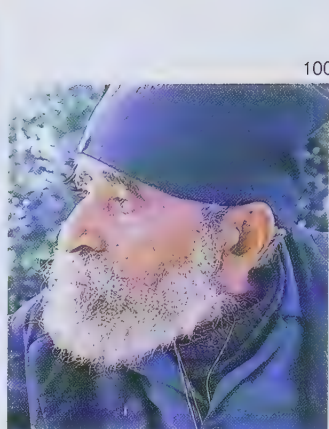
98. Monastery of Apezanes. The interior of St Antony's church.







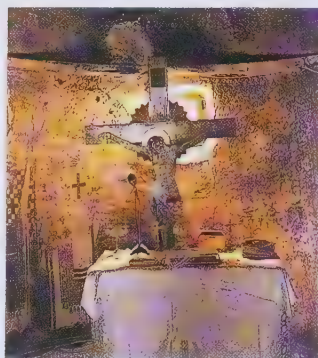
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existence today. The cells were not enough at the beginning and many monks dwelled in nearby caves. The monastery is today resided by three monks.

The visit to Kouthoumas would be considered incomplete if the nearby monuments were left unvisited. A foot-path starting from Kouthoumas and going on westwards for 45 minutes, leads to the cave of Saint Antonios. Saint Antonios' church is entirely built inside the large cave. A little farther in the cave are the cisterns, which served to collect the water of the stalactites. The residents believe that this water has therapeutic effects. Saint Antonios' cave had served as hermits' dwellings in older times. Another 45 minutes' walk farther west leads to the centuries-old monastery of Saint Ioannis. The main church of this monastery is a cavernous church, too, with exceptional wall paintings. The preserved inscription bears the information that the church was restored in 1360. More specifically, it is mentioned that it was restored and painted in the reign of the Emperors Ioannis and Helen Palaeologue. Although Crete was then under Venetian occupation, the Cretans

recognized the Byzantine Emperors as their kings, as we have stressed in another chapter. The name of the ancient god of Medicine, Aesculapius, is also mentioned on the same inscription. It is a survival of the ancient worship practice and it is known that a lot of Aesculapius' sanctuaries had existed on the south coast of Crete.

99. Monastery of Kouthoumas.

100. Neophytos. The last hermit of the Asteroussia Mountains.

101, 102, 103. Wall paintings from the Virgin's church at the village of Kapetaniana, near Kophinas, the summit of the Asteroussia Mountains. This church had been the main church of an old monastery.

104. Monastery of Arvi, Viannos.

105. Deesis. An icon by Angelos. 15th century. Aghia Moni, Viannos.

## To Viannos and the sacred places of the South Coast

**T**he drive to Viannos is relatively long, yet the trip is quite interesting. There are many beautiful villages on the way, mainly wine-producing villages, like Kounavoi, Peza, Melesses, Alagni and others. The road passes through the village of Arkalochori and the area of Embaros with its vast olive groves.

Ano Viannos, the capital of the province but also the starting point for shorter trips in the area, is 65,5 kms from Heraklion. Besides the suggested visits to the monasteries and the other Christian monuments of the area, the visitor could also drive to Apano Syme, which is deserted today. Saint George's church lies there, dated back to 15<sup>th</sup> century, painted by Manuel Phocas. ("It was finished after the Fall of Constantinople", mentions the owner's inscription).

The small coastal settlements of the area of Viannos are very picturesque and have a very mild climate. In order to visit the deserted monasteries of the area you'll have to contact the priests of the villages and ask for the keys to the doors of the churches.

From Viannos the road continues to Ierapetra and the villages of the area.







### MONASTERY OF ARVI

Within the area of Viannos there had been monasteries since the Byzantine period, the churches of which were preserved in later years. The ruins of many old monasteries exist even today. The most typical example is the monastery of **Kyralimeniotissa** (Our Lady of the port), near the coastal settlement of Psari Phoratha (about 85 kms from Heraklion). Tradition has it that the monastery had been deserted because of pirate raids. A few more old monasteries had existed near Viannos and Keratokambos.

**Aghia Moni** (The Holy Monastery) in the province of Viannos is the only old monastery still functioning in the region. It is an important center of art and worship in the area. Two notable icons of the famous Cretan painter Angelos, who lived in the 16th century, are preserved inside its main church. A road, 3 kms long, starting from Kato Viannos, leads to the monastery.

The monastery of **Aghios Dimitrios** at Keratokambos is now desolate. Only the main



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106, 107. The today deserted Monastery of Aghios Dimitrios in the area of Keratokambos, Viannos.

108 108. View of the Monastery of Arvi.





church and vestiges of the old cells, some of which were restored many years ago and are used by shepherds of the district, exist today.

The monastery of **Aghios Antonios** lies at the coastal settlement of Arvi, at a distance of 87 kms from Heraklion. It is built next to the ravine of Arvi, on a site believed to have been a sanctuary of Zeus in antiquity. The monastery is relatively new. It was built in the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but very soon it experienced a period of great prosperity.

Its location, on the slope of the mountain, makes it very scenic, being built on different levels. Today it is resided by only one monk..



109. Monastery of Keralimeniotissa, close to the settlement of Psari Phoratha, Viannos. The sanctuary window.

110. Saint John the Forerunner. Detail from the icon of "Deesis" by Angelos. (Aghia Moni, Viannos).

111. View of the main church of St Antonios' Monastery, Arvi. (Photo: John Froutharakis).



## To the monasteries of the area of Malevizi

**P**siloreitis, the highest mountain in central Crete and a very important place of worship in ancient times, owing to the famous sacred cave of Idaean Zeus, has maintained its religious importance to the present day. At its base, in the province of Malevizi, many big or small monasteries can be visited, of which some have played a significant role in the history of the area and continue to be important places of worship. Psiloritis is surrounded by historical monasteries. A few of the old monasteries still remain but they are no longer active (the monastery of Jerusalem at Loutraki, the monastery of Kavalara in the same region, the monastery of Aghia Eleoussa at Kitharitha and others).

In the tourist resort of Aghia Pelaghia a monastery functioned during the Middle Ages of which only the church has survived. In the old days and prior to the tourism boom (19<sup>th</sup> century), one of the most important religious feasts in the Aegean took place there.

The visitor should stop at the village of Aghios Myron and visit Saint Myron's church with the holy water running inside. The church of the monastery of Eleoussa at Kitharitha remains locked and the priest should be contacted for the key to the door. (Today it is known as Aghios Phanourios' church).

The trips to the monasteries of the area are short, the roads are relatively good and most of them have been well constructed. For specific trips you can consult the map at the end of the book.

### GORGOLAINIS' MONASTERY

Close to the village of Ano Asites, in a higher, cool and densely planted area, lies the old monastery of Aghios Georghios Gorgoleimon or Gorgolainis, as known today. It is 24 kms from Heraklion. It has been active since the Venetian times and is among the monasteries which managed to survive the Turkish dominion. The earliest history of the monastery is unknown. There is no evidence to throw light on the date of its founding or its offer. It was most probably founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the Venetians had allowed the founding of Orthodox monasteries on Crete. A wonderful sculpture, the lion of the fountain, had survived since that period. Water from the perennial spring of Gorgolaini had been running through its mouth for centuries. In 1991, however, the sculpture disappeared. It was stolen...

Throughout the Turkish rule it acquired a lot of dependencies (metochia). The smaller monasteries of the vicinity, which couldn't afford oppression and taxes, had come into its possession. Within a short time it had reached



112. Monastery of St George Gorgolainis. The entrance to the main church.

a period of prosperity and was able to aid the revolutionaries fighting for Cretan freedom. The Turks destroyed it during the 1821 uprising and it had remained completely deserted for several years. It was reconstructed in 1848. Its presence during the following Cretan revolts was even stronger. It was a field of battles and a meeting place for the revolutionaries in the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1868 the chieftain Frangias Mastrachas was killed in a battle there. In commemoration of the event his statue has been set up in the yard of the monastery.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century found the monastery in decay. In 1957 ecclesiastical camps and boarding schools were established there. New buildings were constructed and the monastery was revived. In the early 1990's the Church of Crete decided to re-establish the old historic monastery. Today the community is composed of two monks.

### CONVENT OF AGHIA EIRINI AT KROUSONAS

The convent of Aghia Eirini lies on a slope of Mount Psiloreitis. It is a Christian retreat with flowers and vegetation, with nuns who keep everything in order. The road getting to it passes through the village of Krousonas and covers a distance of 25 kms from Heraklion. Although the convent was founded in recent years, after World War II, it's not actually new. An older monastery, which was destroyed in 1822, had stood on the same site. The Turks had slaughtered all the monks. The monastery had been laid waste. It took more than 120 years to bring the ruins into life again. The nuns strived to reconstruct the ruined buildings. While digging at the site they found crosses and other sacred vessels, used by the monks before 1821 and covered with soil and oblivion. These valuables are preserved in the convent as keepsakes. Today there is a community of 25 nuns.

Near Krousonas there is one more monastery, deserted today. It is the monastery of **Kyria Eleoussa** (Our Lady the Merciful), very close to the village of Kitharitha, on the other side of the river. Today only the church has survived. The cells have been destroyed. It had been an old monastery, active at least since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Byzantine period of Crete, that is since the 12<sup>th</sup> century.



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113. St George's Monastery. The sanctuary.



In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century one of the oldest schools of the district functioned there.

### CONVENT OF SAVVATHIANA

It is a famous convent occupying a site of exceptional beauty, with huge trees and wild vegetation, with a superlative view and lots of memories from olden times. It lies at a distance of 20 kms from Heraklion, however the part of the road past the village of Rogdia is rural. It is one of the monasteries which functioned in Venetian-held Crete in the vicinity of the capital, Chandax (present Heraklion), during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During the Venetian rule it was named "Monastery of Kyr Savvatos" and it is so referred to in documents of the time.

Regarding the older history of the convent, very little evidence exists. Tradition refers to pirate raids, due to which the monks from coastal monasteries resolved to move into a more secure region and thus founded the monastery of Savvathiana.

In the course of the Venetian occupation it was a renowned monastery. To all appearances it was predominant among many other smaller monastic centres of the general region. Many of them were on the shore, the example of the monastery of Aghia Pelaghia in the homonymous present coastal settlement being the most typical one. Aghia Pelaghia remained a famous place of worship for many centuries and in the period of the Turkish domination one of the greatest celebrations of Crete was held there.

The cavernous church of **Aghios Antonios**, very close to the convent, should be considered the center of Orthodox worship and the cradle of monastic tradition in the region. In all probability, not one but two monasteries, one having as "katholikon" the church of Saint Antonios and the other the church of Theotokos, must have occupied the same site. The church of Theotokos is the main church of the present convent. A short foot-path, about 200 meters long, connects the two churches. A small stream, with walnut and other trees on its banks flows between them. In order to facilitate the passage and the communication

114. The belfry of St Eirini's Convent, Krousonas.

115. Theotokos. Icon from the Monastery of Kyria Eleoussa in the province of Malevizi.









between the two centers of worship, the old monks had constructed a stone bridge which is still preserved with an inscription bearing the date 1596.

Maximos Margounios, the renowned scholar of the Venetian period, had been an abbot at the monastery of Savvathiana. At that time the monastery was in prosperity, still the Turkish siege (which was completed in 1669) created various problems. The monastery was destroyed and laid waste, as were all the nearby monasteries during the 22 year-siege of the present-day Heraklion, the most savage siege in human history. The monks of Savvathiana fought against the invader and were captivated and sent to Africa as slaves. They were released after many years thanks to the intervention of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. They returned to their monastery but found it desolate and deprived of its property, which, as usual, had been seized by the invaders. They turned to the Turkish justice, yet the decision was not in favour of them. They managed to reconstruct it and brought the ruined small monasteries of the vicinity into their possession. The present-day visitor can

see vestiges of such monasteries in the picturesque ravine of Almyros, near the spring of the river Almyros, before starting the ascent to Rogdia and to the convent of Savvathiana.

The monks' activity during the siege was the reason why the monastery had been deprived of both money and property for many centuries. Nevertheless, the monks were not daunted. By trying hard they managed to reconstruct the old historic monastery. There were actually economic problems throughout the whole period of the Turkish occupation. The monks of Savvathiana had participated in the 1821 and 1866 revolutions. One of the bravest fighters in the 1866 uprising had been the deacon of the monastery, Eumenios Vurexakis, who was killed in the battle of Almyros. His grave is beside the church of Theotokos at Savvathiana, next to the grave of another great fighter, Heracles Kokkinithis.

An icon of great artistic value had been painted at the monastery of Savvathiana before 1770. It was the icon "Great art thou, o Lord", an identical icon to which is found at the Toplou monastery. They were both painted by Ioannis Kornaros. Until a few years ago





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only the icon of Toplou had been known. Regarding the icon of Savvathiana, there had been information about its existence in an old manuscript but it was believed that it had been lost. In 1991 the nuns delivered an icon, inky-black and faded by time, to the archaeological service. Its careful clearing uncovered parts of the multi-faced beautiful icon of Ioannis Kornaros!

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of the monks started decreasing and after 1945 a few nuns from a nunnery in Peloponnese settled there, replacing the old monks. Today the community is composed of 16 nuns.

#### MONASTERY OF AGHIOS PANTELEIMON, PHTOTHELE

It's a small monastery occupying a beautiful site farther up the village of Pothotele. The trees, the view and the mild climate create a pleasant environment which is only shadowed by the sight of the ruins and the buildings which have been knocked down by ignorant people... The monastery is 31 kms from Heraklion, but the final distance of 3 kms past Pothotele is an earth, though passable, road. The trip is really wonderful. The road passes through vast orchards and a densely vegetated slope.

The history of the monastery is connected with the pirate raids of the Middle Ages. Until then there had been many monasteries in the coastal region between Heraklion and Rethymnon. One of those was the monastery of Saint Antonios at the site of Galinoi. Tradition maintains that the pirates had destroyed and plundered that monastery and the monks who had survived took shelter at Pothotele and founded the monastery of Saint Panteleimon at a place where the buildings were not visible, the monks could be protected and the

116. Savvathiana Convent, choked in vegetation.

117. The Deposition from the Cross (17th c.). Icon from the Convent of Savvathiana. Today it is kept in the Historical Museum of Crete.



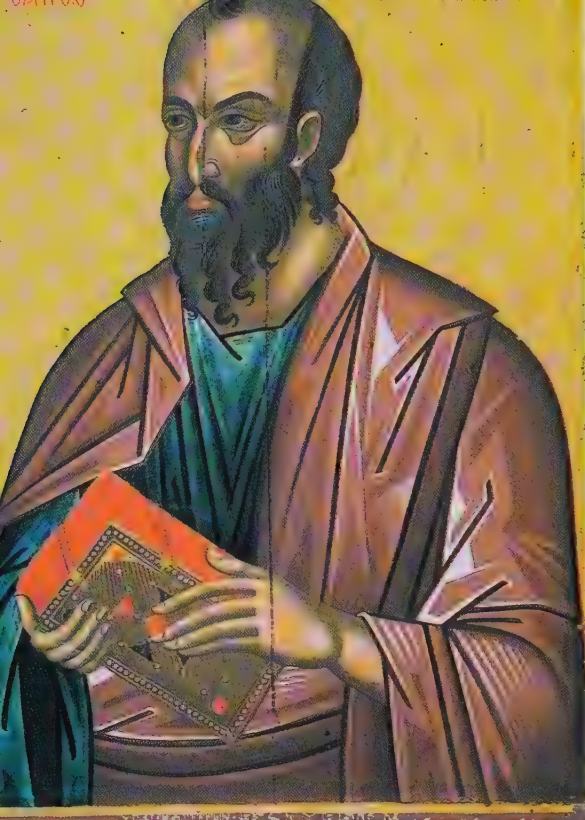




118. The abbot of the Monastery of Saint Panteleimon, Phothele.

119. Christ. Icon by the painter Euphrosynos. A votive offering of the Abbot of the Monastery of Kavalara, Klimis Gaitanis, to Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos.





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possibility of a new disaster could be ruled out. Tradition appears to echo the historical truth only in part: the monastery of Saint Panteleimon had been in existence even before the possible settlement of the new monks.

In 1646 the Turkish army proceeding from Rethymnon towards Heraklion destroyed the monastery. It was reconstructed a few years later. In the course of the Turkish occupation it owned a large property and was the religious and economic centre of the region. In 1824 it was destroyed by the

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Turks for the second time. In the 1866 revolt it was turned into a hospital for the wounded fighters. The abbot of the monastery, Neophytos Pethiotis, distinguished himself in this uprising. Although he had received three strokes from a Turkish sword on the head, he was not cowed. He kept on fighting and lived to see Crete free. After 1900 George, the Prince of Greece himself (Governor of Crete), paid a visit to him in order to thank him for his contribution. Today a solitary monk resides at this monastery.



## Heraklion - Aghios Nikolaos

**T**he trip from Heraklion to Aghios Nikolaos provides the chance to drive through the most frequented tourist region of Crete. The port of Chersonisos, at the 26<sup>th</sup> km (a deviation from the national road to the north), as well as Malia, the next town one comes across, are cosmopolitan areas with many hotels and shops. On a knoll, near the port of Chersonisos, behind Aghia Paskevi's church, one can see the ruins of a significant old Christian basilica. Several pillars and parts of the beautiful mosaic floor have been preserved.

The highway to Aghios Nikolaos is a well constructed road and its various deviations offer the chance to visit some virgin areas of the island, along with a number of very important monasteries. The monastery of Aghios Georghios Selinaris lies just by the national road (there is enough parking space). If you want to visit the now deserted monastery of Aghios Georghios Vrachasiotis, you 'll have to go to the village of Vrachasi first and ask there for the door key and the way to the monastery.

In order to visit the other monasteries of the area you'll have to drive to Neapolis. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> km of the road Neapolis - Lassithi Plateau you will see the monastery of Kremasta. Another road from Neapolis leads to Vigli and the monastery of Panaghia and a third to the other important monasteries of the area of Merabello, like the monastery of Dories (100 meters from the village of Dories), Karthamoutza (close to the village of Karythi) and Areti, which has been restored in recent years. The monastery of Kera at Kritsa should by no means be left out. It lies within a short distance before Kritsa and is known for its frescoes.

### MONASTERY OF AGHIOS GEORGHIOS SELINARIS MONASTERY OF AGHIOS GEORGHIOS VRACHASIOTIS

The monastery of **Aghios Georghios Selinaris** is situated just by the national road Heraklion - Aghios Nikolaos. The distance from Heraklion is 42 kms.

The region is mountainous, beautiful and varying. The serene wildness of the landscape explains the fact why the anchorites and the monks had chosen that mountainous region as their abode. There had been monasteries on the surrounding mountains and farther down, near the sea, since the Byzantine period. If one pauses at the monastery and looks upwards, at the top of the opposite mountain, he will see a big wooden cross, which is frequently covered by fog and clouds in winter-time. The cross indicates the place where a virtuous hermit

had lived and died. His grave is inside an inaccessible and unapproachable cave. He had lived in it in want and praying, only on vegetables and roots.

The present-day monastery was founded in 1961. There had, however, been another monastery on the site, about which we now know nothing! The last monks had lived in the 19th century, when Crete was under the Turkish occupation. The interruption of the historical continuation, due to its long devastation, doesn't allow one to know either the tradition or the earlier history of the monastery. The church of Saint George became a renowned religious center in the opening decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No-one dared to drive past it without pulling off and lighting a candle or kneeling before the icon of Saint George. That phenomenon had turned into a custom and among the worshippers there have been kings, governors and famous people from the Greek Mainland and abroad. The road was then narrow and rising. A frightening precipice was below the road. The awe inspired by the sight of it changed into faith and prayer. Hundreds of articles have been

120, 121. *The Apostle Paul and Saint John the Forerunner. Votive offerings of the Abbot Klimis Gaitanis to a monastery on Mount Athos.*

122. *The Deposition from the Cross. Icon from the Monastery of St Panteleimon, Phothele.*





123. Detail from the beautiful wooden carved iconostasis of St George Vrachasiotis.





124. Among the votive offerings on the Virgin's icon there is a braid of a woman's hair. (Theotokos' church at Perambela, main church of an old monastery).

written about Selinaris and miracles or other impressive incidents have been reported.

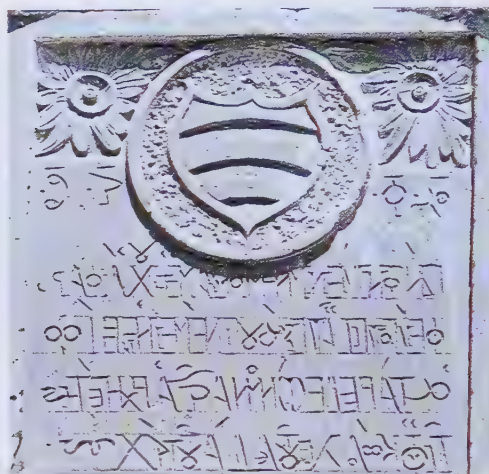
In 1963 Metropolitan Dimitrios founded an

old people's home there which housed poor old people from the district. Selinaris became a center of social offering. Today the com-





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munity comprises three monks.

Higher than Selinaria, on a slope of Mount Dikti, lie the vestiges of another monastery, Aghios Georghios Vrachasiotis. It had been an important monastery in earlier times, as witnessed by the surviving buildings and the ruins. The road leading to the monastery is rural and sets out from the village of Vrachasi.

The monastery of **Vrachasiotis** had flourished during the Venetian times but fell into decay in the years of the Turkish occupation. In mid 19<sup>th</sup> century its wood-carved iconostasis was made, one of the most beautiful and elaborate on Crete. It is a wonderful sample of popular ecclesiastical wood-carving with motifs from the Orthodox tradition. The visitor to the monastery should notice the likewise beautiful, sculpted on grey marble, figure of Saint George, which is on an inscription on the bell-tower. The bell-tower is separate, indication of the Latin influence upon Crete during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The door is locked and in order to visit the church, the priest of the village of Vrachasi should be asked for. By the way, we suggest that the visitor could ask the priest to show



him some icons - samples of the Byzantine art, as it developed in Crete after the fall of Constantinople.

**MONASTERY OF KREMASTA -  
CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN AT VIGLI -  
CHURCH OF THE VIRGIN KERA  
AT KRITSA**

A few indicative examples of Cretan art, and more specifically of wall paintings dated from the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, have survived in the region of Neapolis in the prefecture of Lassithi. These monuments are a short distance from the town, therefore it is easy to visit them. The church of the Virgin at Vigli (**Vigliotissa**) allows one an acquaintance with the art of painting, most probably that of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, as it was expressed by an unknown artist who was based on Byzantine tradition but at the same time had endeavoured to impose his own expressive view. Among the wall paintings of Vigliotissa one can see the depiction of the Epitaph, with the Mother of God bending over Christ's dead body and Magdalene mourning in the characteristic Byzantine posture. Another icon depicts Theotokos in infancy

and Saint Anna watching her movement. On the western wall one can see serene Byzantine faces and the Prophets Elisaeus and Helias. The architectural type of the church is very interesting (cruciform without a dome) and so is the inscription on the west gateway bearing the date 1605. Vigliotissa is an old monastery. The legends of the area report that a monk who answered to the name of Strianis had lived there. In order to visit the church of the Virgin at Vigli one has to follow a passable dirt-road which starts from the town of Neapolis. He should, however, ask the residents of the district for information about the way.

The Monastery of **Kremasta** is one of the monasteries which flourished on Crete during the final decades of the Venetian rule. It lies farther up the town of Neapolis, at a distance of about 2 kms from it. The view while driving there is really impressive. The monastery is a fine building complex deluged in dense vegetation. Originally it had the form of a fortress, but it doesn't seem to have been particularly fortified, probably due to the fact that it lay in the mainland and close to a populated area. The main entrance to the monastery bears the date 1593 while the entrance to the church bears the date 1622. The monastery must be older, though. It is among those monasteries which managed to survive after the Turkish conquest and offered a great deal to the local population. After 1840

125. View of the Monastery of Saint George Vrachasiotis.

126. Vrachasiotis. The funder's inscription dated 1592.

127. Sculpture of Saint George. It is on the bell-tower of the Monastery of St George Vrachasiotis.

128. St George's icon. Monastery of St George Selinaris.

129. Detail from the beautiful wooden carved iconostasis of the deserted Monastery of St George Vrachasiotis.







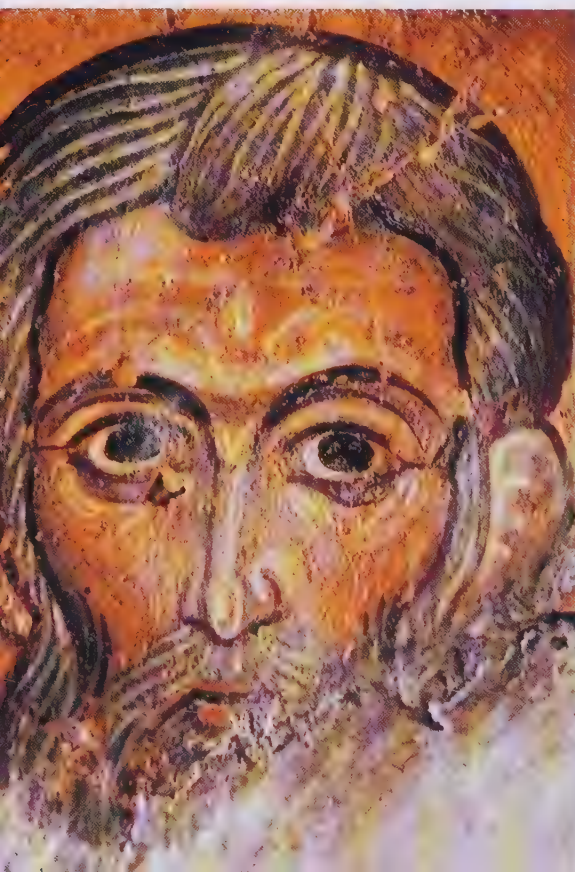
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the first school of the region was founded there, a school that received lots of students and became the hotbed of scholars in a period when illiteracy was the result of the subjugation. The first Christian governor of the prefecture of Lassithi, the Ottoman Pasha Kostis Athosithis, settled there in later years.

In recent years the Metropolitan of the district, Nektarios, proceeded to the restoration of the monastery. The old half-ruined monastery has been changed into a fine monastic establishment, adjusted appropriately to the declivity of the earth and supported by a wall which assisted in the construction of the present elongated building complex.

In order to get a more complete picture of the Byzantine monuments of the province of Merabello one has to pay a visit to the frescoed church of the Virgin at the village of Kritsa, a large village, 11 kms from Aghios Nikolaos. The church of the **Virgin Kera** lies just by the road, before the village (9 kms from Aghios Nikolaos). Whether it was the main church of a small monastery is unknown, the existing evidence, however, doesn't lead to this conclusion. It is a triple-aisled church. The central aisle is dedicated to the Mother of God (the Dormition), the northern to Saint Antony and the southern to Saint Anna. The original church, built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, had only one aisle, the present central one, which had a dome. The other two aisles were annexed in later periods.

The wall decoration of the church allows one to watch the development and the trends of the Cretan school of painting, as it was frescoed in different periods. Very few sections of the original decoration have been preserved. The quality of the wall paintings proves that the original (middle) aisle was



130. The Monastery of Kremasta.

131. Wall painting from the church of the Virgin Vigliotissa, close to Neapolis.

132. Church of Kera at Kritsa. Theotokos' trip to Bethlehem where she had to be entered into the census returns. She is accompanied by Joseph and Jacob. (Fresco).

133, 134. Christ and Theotokos. Frescoes from the church of Panaghia Kera at Kritsa.

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135. Panaghia Kera at Kritsa.

136, 138. George Mazizanis and his wife, patrons of the wall decoration of the Virgin's church at Kritsa. Their costumes are of great interest.

137. Figure of a Saint from the aisle of Saint Anna. church of Kera at Kritsa.

139. The priest is offering the jug with the trial water to Maria, who is accompanied by Joseph. The scene is taken from Jacob's Apocryphal Gospel.

140. A Saint from the wall decoration of Kera.



destroyed in a phase of the history of the church and has been restored.

On the arch of the Sanctuary, which symbolizes the secret heaven (into which Jesus vanished after his Ascension) and the place of the Second Advent, one can see the depiction of Christ's Ascension and the figures of the Prophets Solomon and David. In the Sanctuary one can also see the whole figures of the Hierarchs, as they are usually represented in all frescoed churches. Large parts of these wall paintings have been destroyed.

The dome is not covered with the depiction of the Almighty, as customary, but with scenes from the Gospel. This is not believed to be due to a different style of decoration but merely to technical reasons, which had deterred the painting of a unified theme. Thus, the dome is divided into four sections which are respectively decorated with the representations of Candlemas, Baptism, the Raising of Lazarus and Christ's triumphant Entry into Jerusalem. The dome of the Orthodox Byzantine churches symbolizes heaven. At the church of Kera this symbolization is very strong, as four angels, that is, four heavenly figures, are depicted on the central part of the dome. On the base of it one can see the Prophets, who had prophesied of Christ's Advent, and below, on the triangles of the base, the four Evangelists, Mattheus, Marcus, Lucas and Ioannis. Episodes from Jesus' life are not only on the dome, but also on the western arch. Of exceptional interest is the representation of the Day of Judgement with scenes from the Punishment of the Damned. On the northern wall of the same aisle there is the figure of Saint George, in his panoply. On the western wall is the icon of another military saint, Dimitrios, and on the north-western pillar is the Saint of the Paupers, Saint Franciscus. The depiction of his figure is a result of Latin influence and it is known that Crete had been under Venetian occupation since 1211.

141. Jesus is not depicted on the dome of Kera, as usual in the frescoed churches, but there are four depictions from the Twelve Feasts. On the photo one of them, Baptism.

142. Prophet Iezekiel.

143. Kera. A rare portrayal of a western Saint in an Orthodox church: St Francis of Asisi.

144. Punishment of the Damned. Wall painting from the church of Kera.



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In the south aisle the painting is brighter. The saints seem to be moving, while the general conception of the painter reveals influence from the Macedonian art. You should have a look at the representation of Saint Theodore, the victorious army commander, on the southern wall (the blind arch). He appears to be on horseback and the movement is clearly seen on the representation of his horse. On the two zones parallel to the arch, there are scenes from Virgin Mary's life. In the aisle of Saint Antony we see the patron of the wall decoration, George Mazizanis, with his wife and his child. The impressive costumes of the patrons complete the wall decoration of one of the most important Cretan monasteries.

### MONASTERY OF ARETI DORIES - KARTHAMOUTZA

Close to the village of Phourni, in the province of Merabello, one comes across many Christian monuments of the late Venetian period, both churches and monasteries. The village of Phourni is some 18.5 kms from Aghios Nikolaos, if you take the

road to the village of Nikithiano, and 21.5 kms if you take the road to Elounda. Having Phourni as a base one can visit the nearby monasteries, which are samples of monasterial architecture.

Close to the village is the monastery of **Keramos**, deserted today. It started being built or reconstructed in the final years of the Venetian occupation, shortly before the invasion of the Turks into Crete. Only ruins and a few typical buildings in a relatively good condition are still visible. The monastery was operated till the end of the 19th century by a small number of monks.

The monastery of **Aghios Konstantinos** lies at the village of **Dories** and today its church is used as parochial. It has been a center of arts and civilization in the wider area. A few icons, saved from the damage of time and the destruction that followed the Turkish conquest, constitute evidence of the age of the monastery, which seems to have been in existence since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Byzantine period. The icon of Theotokos (God's Mother), dating







from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, is of the iconographic type of Hodeghitria, as established by the Hodegon convent (the Leaders) at Constantinople. This means that there is an influence on the technique and the theme of those icons from the artistic centre of the time, Constantinople. This influence explains the deeper relationship of the area -and Crete in general- with the capital of the Byzantine State. Tradition has it that the first icon of Hodeghitria was painted by the Evangelist Lucas, however the face of the Virgin is "acheiropoietos", that is, it has been painted by itself and not by a human hand. Of equal interest is the depiction of the Crucifixion, dated 1673.

The visitor can still see parts of the defensive wall, with two gateways at the northern side of the monastery. Between the two gateways there is the old stable, an exceptional vaulted construction for the animals of the monastery. The sculpted belfry, which was constructed in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is also noteworthy. The monastery was dissolved in 1900.

The Monastery of **Karthamoutza** lies close to the village of Karythi. Although it is ruined, the visitor can admire its architecture, the wonderful refectory to the north-west of the main church, the stable and the rest impressive vaulted buildings constructed with the hard black stone of the region. The monastery had been functioning from the final years of the Venetian rule until 1900.

The Monastery of **Areti** is situated to the north of Karthamoutza and is reached by a new road which starts from the village of Karythi. Areti is among the largest and most impressive Cretan monasteries. Its wonderful architecture and the functional arrangement of the buildings make a great impression. It has two successive gateways at the southern side of the building complex. The monastery occupies a large area and apart from the monks' dwellings, one can see establishments



145. Monk Nikothemos (Monastery of Kremasta).

146. The Crucifixion. Icon dated back to 1673. Monastery of St Constantine at the village of Dories, Merabello.

147. A hierarch. Detail from the sanctuary door of the Monastery at Dories.





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148. The Monastery of Areti, as it was at the beginning of the 20th century. (The picture is on the premises of the Bishopric of Petra in the town of Neapolis).

149. The Monastery of Areti. Section of the church door.



for the processing of the agricultural products, an olive and a wine-press, bakeries, store-rooms for the large amounts of the products of the monastery, etc. One can also see the large cisterns where the rain water was stored, as there were neither springs nor wells in the area to supply the monastery with water. Merabello is a dry region. The main church is at the center of the yard but not at the center of the monastery, as the sloping ground had not allowed it. It is a monastery of the Middle Ages which had managed to increase its property and gain control over the monasterial affairs in the area. The nobleman Marcus Papadopoulos appears to be its founder. He had endowed it with large property, as manifested in his will which has fortunately been saved, together with some other documents from the period of the Turkish domination referring to the monastery. Many small monasteries had become its dependencies. During the Turkish rule it was active and self-sufficient. It had an impressive library which included handwritten books of ancient writers, most of which were destroyed in the 1821 revolution. In 1900 the monks from the neighbouring monasteries, which had been dissolved by law, moved to this monastery. Areti experienced a new period of prosperity, however the decay followed very soon. The number of the monks decreased dramatically and the monastery either remained desolate or functioned with a solitary monk.

The Metropolitan of the district, Nektarios, got extensive restoration works under way a few years ago and the monastery is expected to function again. The church is dedicated to the Holy Trinity and the chapel which is next to the main church is dedicated to Saint Lazarus.



150. Sanctuary door from the monastery of Dories.







151. The belfry of the monastery of Dories.

152. A hierarch. Detail from the icon of the Three Hierarchs. It is the sanctuary door of the Monastery of the Saints Constantine and Helen at Dories.



## To the monasteries of Hierapetra

It is a very interesting trip giving one the chance to drive through the rapidly increasing coastal areas to the east of Aghios Nikolaos while having the usually foaming Cretan Sea to the left. The visit to the monasteries and the Byzantine monuments of the area should start from the monastery of Phaneromeni, where a great religious feast is held on 15<sup>th</sup> August.

From the beautiful town of Hierapetra, one can visit the other monasteries of the area. However, only two of those monasteries are active today; Axion Esti, very close to Hierapetra and Exakousti, near the village of Malles, in a piney area. The rest are deserted, yet they preserve memories from very old times. All monasteries are within a short distance from Hierapetra (Meseroi is 20 kms away, Anatoli 16 kms and Malles 26 kms away).

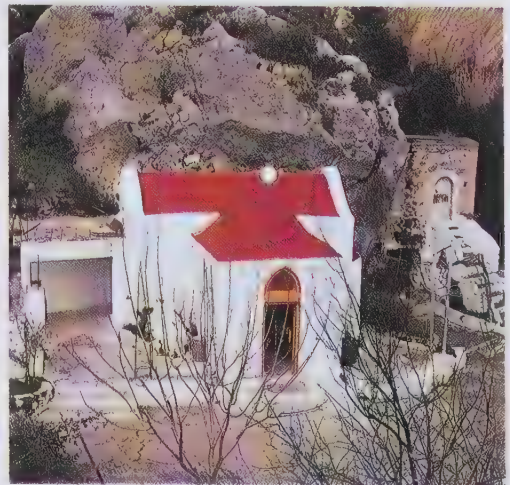
### MONASTERY OF PHANEROMENI OTHER MONASTERIES AT HIERAPETRA

The Monastery of **Phaneromeni** is situated in the area of Gournia, from where a rural road leads to its entrance. It is 22 kms from Aghios Nikolaos. The center of worship at this monastery is the large labyrinthine cave, inside which the icon of God's Mother (Theotokos) is said to have been found. Tradition reports that a shepherd standing on the mountainside opposite the monastery saw a light in the distance and when he went near he found the aforementioned icon. It is an old fortress-like monastery. It has been in existence since the Venetian period but its history is scarcely known. It is believed that in 1282 the chieftains of Crete gathered there and resolved that they would continue their struggle against the Venetian conquerors. Therefore, the monastery must have existed during the 2nd Byzantine period. During the Turkish occupation a secret school functioned at the monastery - according to tradition - where the Cretan heroine Rothanthi studied, who later on disguised herself as a man, fooled the revolutionaries and took to the mountains where she distinguished herself due to her bravery.

The cave of Phaneromeni, the center of worship of the monastery, is the most important part of the entire building complex. That cave has been transformed into a church and the atmosphere is mystagogic. Today it is resided by two monks.



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153. Monastery of Phaneromeni, Hierapetra.

154. The main church of the deserted Monastery of Vayonea, in the area of the village of Anatoli, close to the coastal settlement of Nea Anatoli.

155, 156. From the wall decoration of the church of Vryomeni, close to the village of Meseleroi, Hierapetra.



In the district of Hierapetra, nevertheless, there is a good number of monuments which echo the magnificence and the glory of the Byzantine period. They are samples of fine art carrying memories from a forgotten monastic life. On the way from Phaneromeni to Hierapetra you will come across the settlement of **Episcopi**, with its beautiful Byzantine church. During the Venetian rule it was the see of the Latin Bishop.

A short distance before Hierapetra, on a beautiful site overlooking the plain, lies the new convent of **Axion Esti**, a contemporary monastic and religious center which denotes the reverence of the local population for their Orthodox Christian tradition.

Most of the Byzantine monuments of the area are to the west of Hierapetra, on the foot of Mount Dikti. It is in that region where the convent of **Exakousti** is situated, with a cavernous church and a few contemporary buildings. Vestiges of many other medieval monasteries are also in the same area. The convent of Exakousti is close to the village of





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Malles. You can drive there either from Malles or from the village of Anatoli or finally from the village of Kalamafka.

Very close to Exakousti are the ruins of another old monastery, the monastery of **Armos**. A rural road leads from Exakousti to Armos.

In the vicinity of Anatoli there are three old monasteries: the monastery of Christ at **Pano Karkasa**, the monastery of Aghii Apostoli at **Kato Karkasa** and the monastery of Theotokos Pantanassa at **Vayionia**. All three are deserted and only the churches have survived. The two monasteries at Karkasa can be visited only in a 4WD car from the village of Anatoli. The roads are rural and too rough for a passenger car. It is, however, worth having a look at the fine paintings of both churches. The representation of the Last Supper in the church of Aghii Apostoli is very impressive and rather well preserved. There are also representations of the Baptism, the Deposition from the Cross, the Rising of Lazarus, the Ascension, to mention but a few. The portable icons in the same church are remarkable, but, since the area is remote, they are kept in the

parish collection of the village of Anatoli. Representations of the Crucifixion, the Baptism, the Ascension, the Transfiguration and others are preserved in the church of the Saviour, not in a very good condition, though.

In order to visit Pantanassa at Vaghionia you have to set out from the settlement of Nea Anatoli, having inquired about the way first. The road is rural but passable. The peculiar architectural type of the church is very impressive. It is simple-aisled with a porch which ends at a pointed roof. The visitor can notice the traces of the monastery which had been founded on the site by Neilos Damilas, a learned monk of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In front of the monastery there had been a huge rock and another, higher and more abrupt had been at the eastern side of it. Steps cut in that huge rock and leading to the top are still visible. I suppose that a small defensive tower had existed there and the nuns found shelter inside it in case of piratical assault.

The visitor can ask the priests of the villages Malles and Anatoli for permission to visit the collections of fine Byzantine icons kept there.

## From Aghios Nikolaos to Siteia and Toplou

**Y**ou can get to Siteia either by taking the northern highway or by continuing from Hierapetra to the east. Both trips are very beautiful. If you are a lover of antiquities, you can take a walk around the archaeological site of Gournia or Zakros, at the easternmost part of the island. In any case you should visit the monastery of Kyria Akrotiriani, which is commonly known as Toplou. It is one of the biggest, richest and most impressive monasteries on Crete.

The other monasteries are on the southern part of the province of Siteia. A good road connects the town of Siteia with the picturesque settlements of the Libyan Coast, offering the chance to drive through the hospitable Siteian villages.

### MONASTERY OF TOPLOU, SITEIA

It is one of the most impressive and historic monasteries on Crete. It is built on a dry and rocky plateau in the easternmost corner of Crete, at a distance of 91 kms from Aghios Nikolaos. It impresses the visitor with its size and its high bell-tower, which seems to compete with the clouds. Although the buildings have been beaten by the winds for centuries, the damage caused by time is almost invisible. It has been restored and continues to be an active monastery, the guardian of the Orthodox traditions on Eastern Crete.

The massive fortress protected the monastery during the Middle Ages, when the pirate raids were frequent and terrible. The traditional monasterial architecture enabled the monks to defend and protect themselves. The well-built fortress enclosed the church, the cells and the rooms of common use, along with every activity that secured the monks' survival, even in case of siege. For reasons of space economy, the cells were incorporated in the fortress, they were actually part of the fortress. In some parts the surrounding wall is solid, many metres wide and the vaulted cells

are arranged along it. The architect of the monastery took special care of the entrance. The monastery had two successive gateways. After having passed through the large external gateway one found himself in the external yard. It was the place of the most troublesome activities. The external gate was at the end of a vaulted building. The visitors who arrived there before sunrise used to sit at this place awaiting the opening of the monastery. The second (successive) gate is in the main building and is named "wheel gate". It was very heavy and couldn't be opened easily. For that reason a wheel was adjusted to the base of it which facilitated the work of the door-keeper monk. Just above the gate is the "kata-hytra" or the "killer's hole". If the pirates or

157. Monastery of Vryomeni. General view.

158. The church of St Isidoros on the easternmost coast of Crete.











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the invaders approached and attempted to break the gate, the monks poured scalding oil or lead through it and repulsed them. After passing that gate, one finds himself in the central yard. The holy church stands before his eyes which, too, is incorporated in the fortress. The yard is too small for such a large monastery. This is due to the purely defensive structure of the monastery. The architect attached great importance to the fortification of the monastery and the security of the monastic community who lived in such a far-off and remote area...

The church is small and devout. It has two aisles. One is dedicated to the Virgin and the other to Saint John the Theologian. A few wall paintings have been preserved in the left-hand aisle, while a few notable icons of the 18th century are to be seen on the iconostasis. A door leads from the church to the museum of icons and ecclesiastical art. Some of the most important Cretan icons are kept there: the small icon of Saint Anastasia, on the bottom of which one can see the representation of the monastery, the icon of Christ Enthroned, the icon of Saint John the Baptist, the icon "Great are thou, o Lord" by Ioannis Kornaros, to mention but a few. Especially the last makes a great impression with its synthesis. It is a multi-faced icon divided into four central and 57 secondary units with hundreds of faces depicted in an excellent way. It is a version of the prayer of the Great Aghiasmos (Holy Water Rites), as conceived by the important painter. The poetic composition of the Prayer

- 159. *Theotokos the Immaculate. Icon from the Monastery of Toplou.*
- 160. *Monastery of Toplou. General view of the fortified establishment, after the restoration works carried out recently.*
- 161. *Wall painting from the main church of the Monastery of Akrotiriani or Toplou, as it is commonly named.*





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is attributed to Saint Basil but it was completed by the Patriarch of Jerusalem Sophronios. Sophronios is illustrated on the icon holding an open book on his knees with the prayer written on it. The secondary units bear scenes from the Bible along with other representations. The painter preferred to divide the representations with figurative devices rather than with squares, as done on his icon of Saint Anastasia. This fact lends the icon the harmony of the unity. The painter Ioannis Kornaros is renowned for his activity in other regions (i.e. Cyprus). The icon "Great are thou, o Lord" was painted in 1770, when the painter was 25 years old. A few years earlier he had painted a similar icon at the monastery of Savvathiana, a short distance from Heraklion. Unfortunately, the biggest part of that icon has been damaged.

Sacred vessels and other objects related to the history of the monastery are kept in another museum, on the ground floor of the eastern wing.

The history of the monastery has been lost through the centuries. We don't know what had existed there before the capture of Crete

by the Venetians. Many historians have related the founding of Akrotiriani with another monastery of the region, the monastery of **Aghios Isithoros**, which is sited in the easternmost part of Crete, in a dry and completely barren area, on a small pro-montory, where in all probability an ancient sanctuary had existed. Recent excavation conducted in the area uncovered ruins of the old church of Saint Isithoros together with monks' bones, thus proving that a small monastery had functioned in the region. Today the visit to the monastery of Aghios Isithoros is impossible because the access to the area is forbidden by the Greek army. I believe that the monastery of Aghios Isithoros had functioned as an independent monastery during the 14<sup>th</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. The monasteries of the province of Siteia, and especially those which were built near the coast, very often experienced the misfortune of the pirate raids. Documents of the time record that the pirates pillaged the monastery of Akrotiriani and some villages in the province of Siteia in 1498. It is certain that there was the aisle of Saint John the Theologian at that time, which had been painted at least one century



prior to the pirate incursion. Sections of the wall paintings, done according to the typical arrangement of the Orthodox iconography, are still to be seen. Very few things are preserved in the monastery from that early period. One of the oldest objects kept in Akrotiriani is the seal dated back to the 15<sup>th</sup> or the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which was published in 1884. It seems that the monastery was at the height of its power in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a fact proved by the beautiful icons painted in that period, such as the Dormition, in earthly colours and bearing the typical characteristics of the Cretan school of painting, and Christ Pantocrator (Lord of the Universe), which had faded and in 1765 was painted over by a Cretan painter of the time.

In 1530 the monastery was plundered by the knights of Malta but very soon managed to find its pace again. In the following century, and more precisely in 1612, it was destroyed by a strong earthquake which struck Eastern Crete. After much exertion it was re-constructed and regained its familiar fortress-like form. The effort was supported by the Venetian State itself, by granting 200 ducats for the restoration of the fortified establishment. The Venetians, who felt the great Turkish danger approaching their possessions, made efforts to support any activity which had a military and defensive character. A fortress, with scores of monks living inside, was evidently very useful in this remote area.

In the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the monastery had the good fortune of being ruled by Gabriel Pantogalos, one of the most significant churchmen of that time. He was the abbot whose name was connected with the period of the great prosperity of the monastery. During his abbacy the monastery was kept in good order and acquired a vast property, which contributed to its further development. The monastery reached the highest point of prosperity later on, during the Turkish occupation. The great Venetocretan Kornaros family, a descendant of which was the poet of the important work "Erotokritos", is mentioned among the patrons of the monastery. It was Gabriel who had decided on the architectural form of the monastery and eventually succeeded in materializing the envision of the unknown architect. His name exists on a beautiful inscription which is walled on the western side of the church.



162, 163. Details from the icon "Great art thou, o Lord", painted by the great Cretan painter Ioannis Kornaros in 1770.



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During the Turkish rule the monastery of Akrotiriani was named Toplou owing to the fact that it had a cannon (top). In the early years of the subjugation (after 1646 and till the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century) it faced serious financial problems. Fortunately it recovered soon, before the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and started to play a significant national and social role. A school functioned there which was attended by the young monks but also by the children of the district. In the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was one of the most important religious centers on Crete. Especially after 1760 it obtained some of the most representative icons of the time, samples of the art which prevailed in Crete after the Turkish conquest. Those icons are found today either in the church or in the museum of the monastery. Most typical are the icons of Ioannis Kornaros ("Great art thou, o Lord" and "Saint Anastasia"), the icon "Rose the Unperishable" with the representation of the fortress of the monastery on its left lower edge and the icon of "the Enthroned Virgin". The monastery suffered great misfortunes by the Turks. The pillage and the blackmailing of the community were frequent phenomenons. It is reported that a Turkish aga, by the name of Kasapis, used to go there and blackmail the monks, until finally they paid another Turk to kill him, because they couldn't stand his cruelty any longer. One night when Kasapis was at the monastery, the other Turk pushed him from up the staircase and he fell blood-drenched on the paved yard. His dead body was loaded on the horse and the animal, knowing the way, set out for the aga's house. On the way, however, the ropes got loose and the corpse fell off, a few hundred meters to the west of the monastery. The Turks, unfortunately, found the corpse, held the monks responsible for the crime and the monastery suffered great hardships by the avenging Turks, as recorded in a document dated 1812.

The national contribution of the monastery was significant. In 1821, when the first great Greek revolution broke out, the conquerors killed 14 monks and laymen residing at the monastery and its "metochia" (dependencies) and plundered its store-rooms. The monks participated in the 1866 uprising, too, and they again played a significant role during the last turbulent period in the history of the island,

the German occupation, when a wireless transmitter was installed in the monastery.

In recent years an effort is being made to give the building complex its original style. The monastery is one of the most important monuments in the province of Siteia. Apart from being a magnificent monument, it has always been a religious center attracting great numbers of worshippers. Today it is resided by two monks.

### MONASTERY OF KAPSAS

It is sited on the south coast of Eastern Crete. An earth-road leads to it, which requires careful driving. The monastery occupies a beautiful site, with a view to the Libyan Sea. It is built on a mountainside, next to the exit of a wild-ravine. The visitor is awed at the sight of it, as the altitudinal difference makes it even more remote. Its founding is due to the existence of a cave of worship, which in all probability had been the residence of hermits ever since Byzantine times. The engravings and the tradition reveal the holy memories of the place, memories which were suddenly interrupted by a pirate assault in the 15<sup>th</sup> or the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The wider area, nonetheless, preserves old religious memories. Before arriving at Kapsas one comes across the small settlement of Kalo Nero, where early garden products are cultivated inside greenhouses. In this settlement there is the old frescoed church of Theotokos. The paintings are not very well preserved, whereas many engravings of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries are still seen on them, which reveal dates and names of Greek and Venetian



164. Saint John the Baptist. Icon of the painter Frangias Kavertzas, 17<sup>th</sup> century. (Detail).

165. Detail from the icon of the Three Hierarchs, monastery of Toplou.

166. Christ Pantocrator. Most probably it is an icon of the icon painter Andreas Ritzos (15<sup>th</sup> century). Monastery of Toplou. (Detail).

167. The Angel is dictating to Saint John the Theologian while he is writing... Detail from an icon at the monastery of Toplou.

168. Detail from the icon "Great art thou, o Lord", by Ioannis Kornaros.







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pilgrims. The church belongs to the monastery of Kapsas today and cells, which were occupied by monks of Kapsas in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are visible next to it. A small independent monastery must have existed on the site in older times.

The small monasteries of the region were deserted after their devastation in the 15<sup>th</sup> or the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They were to be revived in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a Cretan anchorite, pursued by the Turks, settled there. His name was Yerontoyiannis. He was totally illiterate, yet a man of vision and organizing abilities. It was him who constructed the monastery and made it a center of worship in the whole region. What happened at the monastery of Kapsas in those years indicates how deeply the religious feeling was rooted in the Cretans' souls. There were not only those who flocked in the church, but also those who believed in the holiness of the anchorite himself. Yerontoyiannis, who was a native of the district, was to be identified with the newly established monastery. After his death the monks honoured him as a saint. Today he is regarded as a local saint. He is worshipped in the monastery and

169. View of the monastery of Kapsas, on the south of the Siteia province.

170. Handiwork of the nuns of St John's Monastery at Korakies, Akrotiri, Chania.

also in a cave of the steep ravine which is believed to have been his hermitage.

The monastery is active today and the visitor can admire the beautiful cavernous church and its wonderful mosaic floor with religious and other decorative patterns.

# The monasteries of the Akrotiri, Chania

**W**ithin a short distance from Chania, on a waterless, still rich in vegetation, promontory, one can admire some of the most important monastic establishments on Crete. It is a holy land, studded with monasteries, either big or small, places of worship, sacred caves but also caves of hermits and ascetics. From Chania you can take the road to the airport with its deviations, as seen on the map. The routes are short and offer the chance of a one-day trip. The first monastery to come across, the monastery of Aghios Ioannis at Korakies, is only 7 kms from the town.

If you want to visit the monastery of Katholikon inside the homonymous ravine, you should wear comfortable shoes so that you can walk down there. The walk may not be too easy, yet it offers the chance to admire a significant monument along with the wonderful nature.

## AKROTIRI

The drive from Chania to Akrotiri offers a unique chance to visit a few historic monasteries gathered on a small strip of land, which outline the rich history and the ages-old religious tradition of the area. Apart from the three active monasteries, you can also visit the small monastic buildings, the vestiges of the monastic and ascetic life, the ruins which bear testimony to different times and different living conditions. Occasionally you have to walk for more than an hour (including the return). It is more than certain, though, that you will find it worth the trouble...

## CONVENT OF KORAKIES

It's the first convent one comes upon on the way to Akrotiri. It lies close to the village of Korakies. Today very few things from its earlier history have survived and its old buildings date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We don't know when its daedalian historical course precisely started, nevertheless it is an old convent. During the Venetian occupation, but also in the early years of the Turkish occupation, it was named "convent of Aghios Ioannis Vita", as it appears in documents of the time. Although the meaning of the name Vita is unknown, it was possibly the surname of its founder or its restorer. The present name (Korakies) is due to the nearby village which bears the same name.

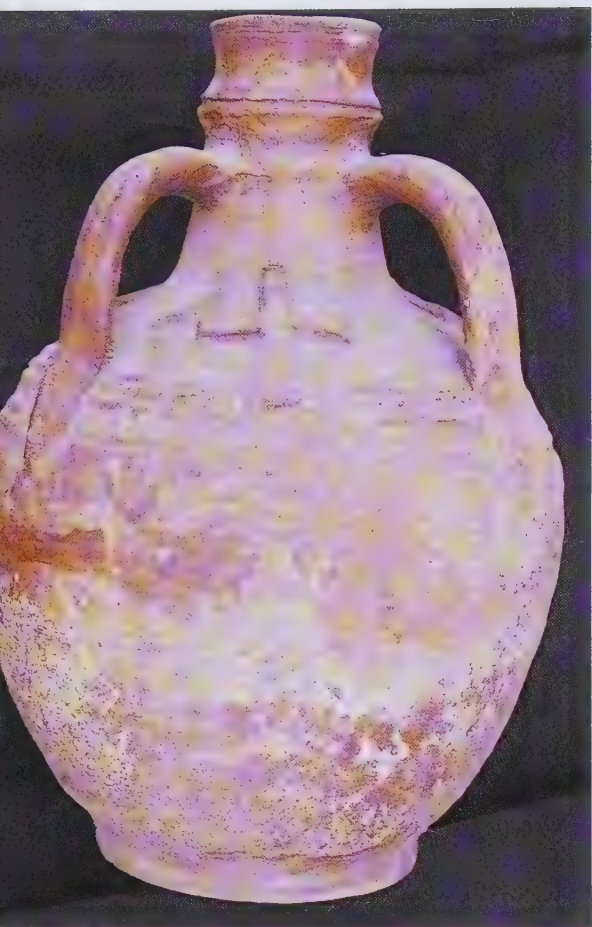
It must have been functioning as a convent since the Venetian period. The convents exi-



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sting on Crete since the Venetian times suffered great hardships during the subsequent period (Turkish rule). The janissaries found their victims easily among the unprotected and weak nuns. They frequently plundered the isolated nunneries of Crete and raped or killed the nuns. That led to the extinction of the female monasticism for long periods of time. There is no convent on Crete which had escaped the Turks' rage and their cruelty. Most of them were eventually dissolved. The convent of Saint Ioannis Vita at Korakies was destroyed in the 1821 revolution and the nuns were slaughtered. A similar sacrifice took place in 1866, while the convent was being reorganized. In the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it acquired great fame and evoked the





171. An earthen ecclesiastical vessel from the monastery of Korakies.

interest of many ecclesiastical and social personalities of the time. Even the wife of the Ambassador of Great Britain in Athens, Lady Egerton, supported the efforts of the nuns to survive after such persecutions and sufferings. She invited a nun to Athens to be taught the art of embroidery there. The great embroidery tradition, surviving even today at the monastery, was then initiated. The nuns make beautiful embroidered and handwoven items thus securing both their and the convent's survival. The visitor can admire such pieces of handicraft in the museum of the convent, where old notable ecclesiastical vessels are also kept.

## THE MONASTERY OF AGHIA TRIATHA (HOLY TRINITY)

It is one of the most impressive and best preserved Cretan monasteries. It lies on Akrotiri, some 16 kms from Chania. A straight road, with trees planted along it by the monks, leads to its entrance. Before the entrance there is a large square from where one can admire the magnificent buildings. The sloping ground necessitated the erection of three-storied buildings externally and two-storied buildings internally. Thus, the flat yard of the monastery was created, at the center of which is the beautiful main church. The external gateway is a western influence, which means that the 17th century architect had studied the Architecture books available in western Europe and was able to adopt the new architectural currents without, nevertheless, corrupting the traditional architecture of the Orthodox Church. On the southern side of the monastic establishment is the chapel of the graveyard, which is approached by a path parallel to the western wing. The rest parts of the monastery are equally impressive. The refectory, a large rectangular room, where the monks used to dine all together, bears testimony to the coenobitic past of the monastery.

The main church is a triple-apsed church with two chapels and a narthex. The erection of the church had not been completed when, in 1645, the Turks captured Crete. It was finished later on, when the Viceroy of Egypt Mehmed Alis (Mohamed Ali) granted some privileges to the subjugated Cretans.

The building structure of the monastery was designed so well, that all the needs of the monastic community were met and the monks didn't have to go out, especially in periods of high tensions. The store-rooms for the storage of the agricultural products, as well as the establishments for their processing, are inside the monastery. Under the large tiled yard are the cisterns for the storage of the rain water, because the whole area is dry, without natural springs.

The history of the monastery starts long before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, yet the date of its founding is unknown. It was certainly a small monastery, resided by a restricted number of monks, which in all probability belonged to the wealthy Mourtaros family. The monastery was mentioned by the name of Mourtaros for



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centuries, while today it bears the name of the refounders, Tzangarolos. The Hieromonks Jeremias and Laurentios Tzangarolos played a significant part in the history of the monastery. They had been in the community of Aghia Kyriaki, close to Chania, before they were called to take up the organization of Aghia Triatha according to the coenobitic rule. On the door of the narthex the visitor can read the inscription which bears their names and the date 1634. It is bilingual, Greek and Latin. Those two monks organized the monastic life and made the monastery one of the biggest on Crete. The Turkish conquest, which had taken place before their work was completed, interrupted the developing course of the monastery. Tradition reports that the Turks

*172. View of the Monastery of Aghia Triatha of the Mourtaros.*

*173 (p. 118). Monastery of St John Eleimon at Galagatho.*

*174. Aghia Triatha of the Mourtaros. The colonnade at the facade of the church.*

imprisoned the abbot who had tried to carry out building works and demanded a large sum of money to release him.

In the course of the Turkish rule Aghia Triatha got involved in a conflict with the monastery of Meghisti Lavra on Mount Athos claiming Aghia Moni (the Holy Monastery) of the Saracen, which lies at the village of Mournies, close to Chania. The Patriarchate eventually decided in favour of Meghisti

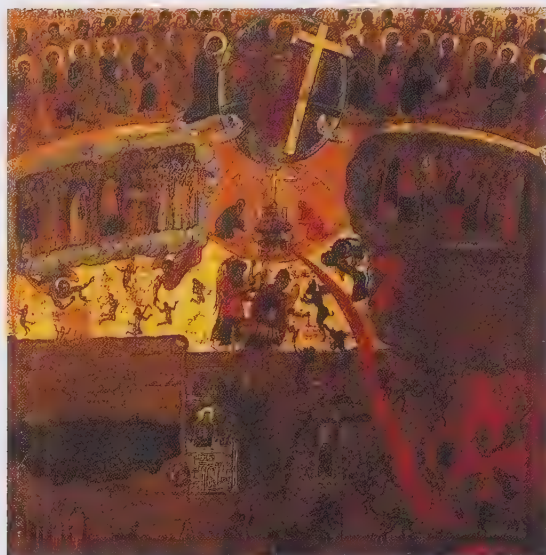








175. *The Last Judgement. Icon of the 17th century. It is in the Museum of Aghia Triatha of the Mourtiaros.*  
 176. *Aghia Triatha: The main entrance.*  
 177. *Katholikon. The cavernous church of St Ioannis the Hermit.*  
 178. *Gouverneto. Sculpture from the facade of the church.*  
 179. *The Monastery of Pervolitsa.*



Lavra and the small monastery of the Saracen is even today in its possession. In that same period it acquired extensive estates as well as many small monasteries which were facing the danger of being dissolved. Today's visitor can pay a visit to some of them and see for himself the religious importance of the area. These monasteries are:

1. The monastery of Saint John Eleimon (the Merciful) at the village of Galagatho (present Pazinos). It's a fortress-like monastery, yet its church is not situated at the center of the yard, as imposed by the Orthodox monasterial architecture. It is sited at the north-eastern end, resting against the external wall, as it was common with the Latin monasteries. It was obviously built either by a Latin architect or by a native who was influenced by the western architecture. Monks who had formerly been in the community of Aghia Triatha settled there and took care of the church and the cultivation of the land thereabouts.

2. The monastery of the Virgin at the village of Pervolitsa. It is sited near the airport, in a fascinating region. The only spring of Akrotiri is at this place. The view to the bay of Southa is astonishing. Only the church and vestiges of the cells are extant today.

3. The monastery of Saint George at Charondia. It lies close to the village of Mournies and is in ruins. (There is only the church and some ruined cells). It was property of the Bishop Anthimos and his family. That bishop ceded the monastery to Aghia Triatha shortly after 1700.

4. The monastery of Saint John at Samoli. It is near the village of Mouzouras but, apart from the drive, a short walk of about 10 minutes is required in order to get there. The cavernous church and a few vaulted buildings of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century have been preserved. In the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century two hermits, Akakios and Gerasimos, who are honoured today as saints at the monastery of Aghia Triatha, led their ascetic life there.

The monastery of Aghia Triatha supported the struggle for liberation from the Turks and was destroyed during the revolution of 1821. Its contribution to education was of great significance. It had founded a school where many Cretans were taught how to read and write. After 1821 (and the short period of devastation that had followed) the school was

reorganized and famous teachers were called to teach there. In the end of the 19th century an ecclesiastical school functioned there for the first time.

Today there are five monks in its community.

### MONASTERY OF GDERNETTO (GOUVERNETO)

A narrow road, starting out from the western side of the square of Aghia Triatha, leads to the entrance of one more significant monastery on Akrotiri, the fortress-like monastery of Gdernetto or Gouverneto. It has retained many of its original architectural features although it went under a lot of unsuccessful interventions in the 1950's. It is one of the oldest monasteries in the area and its contribution to the national fights, the religious life and the local society is inestimable. It is dedicated to the Virgin (our Lady of the Angels) but it is also known as the monastery of a local saint, Saint Ioannis the Hermit.

To all appearances it was property of the great and wealthy Mormoris family, however neither the "Typikon", which defined its function, nor any other documents relevant to its foundation have been saved. Near the end of the 16th century the renowned Mitrophanis Phasidonis, a skilled mariner, who had given his services to the Venetian navy, lived there as a monk (and also served as its abbot for a certain period). The Venetians held him in high esteem and had often respected his point of view on basic matters regarding the function of the monastery. That is, he succeeded in working upon the feelings of the Venetians - who needed him- in favour of his monastery. When he grew old, the Venetian Senate consented in granting him a pension which was to be deposited in the monastery budget after his death.

In 1621 Jeremias Tzangarolos, known from the monastery of Aghia Triatha, was the abbot at Gdernetto. Scandals had broken out at the monastery and efficient and capable Jeremias managed to organize it according to the coenobitic rule. He remained at the monastery of Gdernetto for a short time and then he went back to his monastery, Aghia Triatha. In the late years of the Venetian rule it was one of the wealthiest monasteries on Crete. It had many monks, revenues and vast estates. The

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180. Arkouthiotissa. The rock in the shape of a bear.

181. Arkouthiotissa. The cavernous church of Theotokos has been built inside the cave of the "bear".





Turkish conquest came to interrupt its growth and prevent the completion of the beautiful cruciform church.

The Turks butchered the monks in the 1821 revolution and sacked the monastery.

Today it is resided by four monks.

### **“KATHOLIKON” “ARKOUTHIOTISSA”**

The visit to the monastery of Gdernetto offers one the opportunity to get to know two more significant monuments in the area. A rocky foot-path starts out from the northern side of the monastery's square and leads to the caves of Arkouthiotissa and Saint Ioannis the Hermit. The path is sloping and passes by the sacred places of the Cretan anchorites who had lived there since the Byzantine times. The recollection of those hermits is very strong in the tradition which refers to Saint Ioannis the Hermit's life and death within a cave of the region.

As one commences the visit to the monuments of the area, he will see a small group of buildings across the way (to the left). A church is vaguely seen at the center. It was once the monastery of Saint Antonios. I believe that it was independent in olden times, but later, when the monastery of Gdernetto started growing, it became subject to it.

A 10 minutes' walk leads to the ruins of another small monastery (on the right hand side), on the slopes of a low mountain. Stones fallen on the ground and two arches still standing make the place known to the visitor



'82. Monastery of Gdernetto (Gouverneto).

'83. The church of Katholikon.





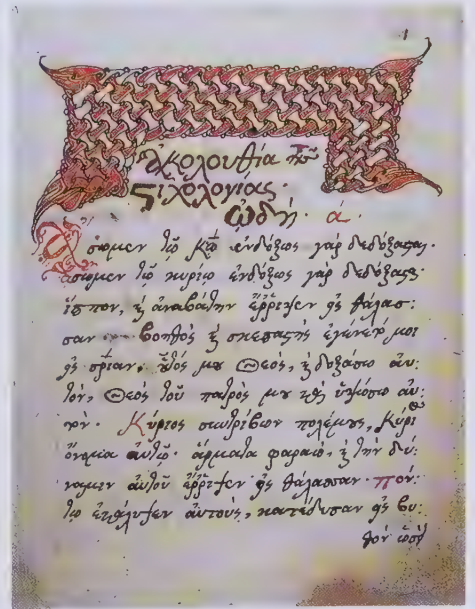


reaching it for the first time. A few metres farther, among the ruins, a great surprise follows the temporary depression caused by the sight of the ruins. The visitor finds himself at the mouth of a large cave which is dimly and strangely lit by the daylight. At the center of the cave an effigy of a bear transfers one into the sphere of legends and traditions. The bear seems to be bowing over a cistern. Its stony large body covers a big part of the cistern. The stalactites have been dripping water for centuries, thus becoming the reason for the existence of sufficient water in the dry and waterless area. The rocky bear is not a creation of human hands. It hasn't been sculpted out of stone by a sculptor. It is probably a stalagmite which has taken that form in the wake of the centuries.

Tradition reflects that the bear was alive once and that it used to drink all the water of the cistern, thus depriving the thirsty monks of it. The monks and the other residents of the district couldn't see the bear drinking the water, still when they went to the cave they always found the cistern completely dry. One day they lay in wait and saw the bear approaching. It was so big that the cave became dark. The people who saw it were scared to death. One of them immediately started to beg the Virgin for help. No sooner had he finished his prayer than the bear was petrified! The stone bear has been by the cistern for many centuries ever since...

The legend usually explains the inexplicable, that is the things which cannot be explained by common sense. Research, however, has proved that the ancient goddess Artemis had been worshipped in that cave in the form of a bear. That celebration was held near the end of the winter, some day in February. When the faith to the ancient gods had faded, the Christians didn't forget their sacred places. The inhabitants of the area kept on visiting the same place, yet they worshipped the Virgin instead: the Virgin Arkouthiotissa, whose feast-day is annually on 2 February, on Candlemas. Throughout Greece, and especially Crete, one encounters cases of survival of the worship customs in everyday life. The Orthodox church adopted those customs, adjusted them to its principles and preserved them through the ages.

At the one side of the cave of Arkouthiotissa there is the church of the Virgin. Hidden in-



184. View of Katholikon.  
185. Katholikon, the bridge.  
186. Manuscript from the museum of the Monastery of Gouverneto.



side the rock, it seems to connect the ages, the Greek past with the Greek present.

The visitor leaves the place fully impressed. A 15-20 minutes' slow walk precedes the descent of a very sloping mountain side. Two little spherical houses, with space enough to hold only one person, are to be seen on the opposite right hand slopes. They had been occupied by hermits, most probably since the 2nd Byzantine period. Although there is no historical evidence, the tradition has preserved characteristic details from the ascetic life in the area. Some hermits lived in steep inaccessible caves, devoted solely to praying, while their fellow-hermits used to provide them with a little food and water in baskets which they pulled from above.

Farther down, one sees the exit of a steep and wild gorge in front of him. On the shore, by the gorge, there is a rock which has been beaten by the waves for centuries. It looks like a boat. It is said to have been a piratical boat, which had brought pirates to Akrotiri to sack the monasteries of the area. The pirates left the boat there and went to pillage Katholikon, the monastery that will be reached shortly. As soon as the monks had seen them, they prayed to God and the boat was immediately turned into stone. It is said that, at midnight, one can hear the voice of the captain, who is trying to sail the boat away. This is what the beautiful tradition reports, bringing into mind some dramatic pages of the local history. The descent is becoming steep and wild. The old monks had built steps to make it easier and less dangerous. Other steps were cut into the rock. After climbing down 150 steps one arrives at the beautiful deserted monastic building. A large cave is seen to the left before the entrance to the monastery. A flashlight is needed in order to proceed in the dark. A hermit is said to have lived there, who was made a local saint by the church, Saint Ioannis the Hermit. The local tradition relates that the saint used to live only on vegetables and that his body was stooped by the hardships. One evening he had gone out to pick vegetables, was bowed and looked like an animal walking on four feet. A hunter saw him, took him for an animal and shot him with his bow. The Saint crawled into his cave with difficulty, where the hunter, following the blood-stains, caught him while he was still alive. He died in

the cave of Katholikon and the area has become a famous place of worship ever since.

Certain researchers state that the tradition referring to Saint Ioannis the Hermit echoes the action of another hermit, known by historical sources, who had taken action in the Byzantine years, Saint Ioannis Xenos (Stranger) or Hermit. They are, however, worshipped as different saints and their portrayals are different. In any case, the Byzantine memories are strong in the area.

The buildings are magnificent and the church is cut into the rock. Nothing else but hermit's cells and a deep gorge existed there many centuries ago. It was difficult to get from the one bank of the gorge to the other. The architect of the monumental work found an easy solution. A giant stone bridge was constructed which connected the banks of the gorge and so the fear of the precipice faded away. All the buildings were erected on the bridge and upon the supporting constructions, thus taking advantage of the sloping ground. The above side of the bridge became a square and was covered with soil. The other vaulted buildings secured space for the church yard. With this technically difficult construction, the architect succeeded in creating a wonderful building complex, in securing the good function of the place and in taming the wild precipice. Monks from the monastery of Gdernetto dwelled there, as this sacred place was subject to it at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and they were responsible for the maintenance of the church. As one can imagine, the buildings accommodated the worshippers arriving there from the whole area.

The walk back is ascending and more tiring. You can, however, make a few stops and meditate upon the religious importance of the place. It is certain that you will not regret it...

187. (p. 127) *Monastery of Aghia Triatha of the Mourtaros or the Tzangarolos. The entrance to the church with obvious influence by the western architecture.*

188. (p. 128) *A beautiful sanctification cross, today kept in the ecclesiastical museum of the Convent of Zoothochos Pighi of Chartophylakas (Chrysopighi). Other sanctification crosses, a few important icons of the Cretan Renaissance, the ducal decrees regarding affairs of the monastery and other valuables, are also kept in the same museum.*







## To the environs of Chania and to Apokoronas

**T**he convent of Chrysopighi or Zoothochos Pighi of Chartophylakas, is situated very close to the town of Chania. It is the first (and most important) monastery one comes across during his visit to the environs of Chania and the villages of Apokoronas. Don't forget that monasteries remain closed for a couple of hours at midday. From Chrysopighi you can continue to Mournies, a historical village in the vicinity of Chania with two monasteries, one at its center (Aghios Eleutherios' monastery) and a second at its edge (Sarakinas' Holy Monastery).

Before visiting the monastery of Aghios Georghios at Charondia, as well as the other nearby monasteries and religious places (cave of the Seven Boys, Aghia Kyriaki's convent), you can ask for information about the way at the village of Mournies.

If you follow the national road, at the 15th km, take the fork to the ancient town of Aptera and visit the dependency (metochi) of the monastery of St Ioannis the Theologian of Patmos. The monastery is inside the enclosed archaeological site of Aptera, consequently you'll have to inquire about the visiting hours of the site.

Historical Byzantine monuments have been preserved in the beautiful province of Apokoronas, such as Panaghia the Monastira at Stylos, Aghios Georghios at Kournas and others, which are described below. The frescoed churches of the area are locked and the priests of the area should be contacted for the keys.

### CONVENT OF CHRYSOPIGHI (Zoothochos Pighi of Chartophylakas)

Following the road Chania - Southa one meets the fork to Chrysopighi at the 3rd km (to the right). One kilometer's drive takes one to the entrance of the convent, which has a female community today. In earlier years it was resided by monks, though, who made history with their adventures and their sacrifice. The convent is built in the form of a fortress while the main entrance bears the coat-of-arms of its founder, the physician Ioannis Chartophylakas, a man who offered good services when, in 1595, a great epidemic had broken out in Crete. Venice honoured him and awarded him the title of nobility. I presume that an old small monastery had existed on the site of the present convent, which was restored by Chartophylakas. He donated considerable land to the monastery and lay the foundations of its development. Ioannis Chartophylakas compiled the "Typikon" which defined the rules of Chrysopighi's function, the obligations and the rights of the monks, etc. That "Typikon" was lost, but the future monks made it a point to renew and adjust it to the special conditions developed in

Crete in the course of the Turkish rule. The "adaptation" of the original text which has been preserved provides a lot of information concerning the mode of governance of the monastery, as defined by Ioannis Chartophylakas. Among other things the "Typikon" made provision for the functioning of a school at the monastery. The monks fulfilled their obligation. We now know that reading and writing were taught at Chrysopighi at least during the 19th century, although we don't know what had happened in older times, owing to the absence of historical sources.

The present-day visitor can admire the triple-apsed main church, the narthex of which was built in 1863 (the church having been erected in the 17th century). Icons painted in the 19th century as well as the exceptional woodcarved iconostasis are preserved in the church. Important icons dating from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, as well as sacred vessels, the ducal decrees of Chrysopighi and old hand-written books are kept in the museum of the convent. Today Chrysopighi has a female community and the nuns are creating a new tradition and are guiding the convent towards a new period of spiritual radiance and pro-





sperity. They are all young nuns who have organized their coenobitic convent according to the traditional values of the Orthodox religion. They have restored the buildings having respected their prior form, have organized a computer department for the publication of ecclesiastical magazines and have created an icon-painting studio, where about ten nuns have been painting wonderful, icons, true copies of original Byzantine art.

Historical evidence: The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a brilliant time for the convent of Zoothochos Pighi or Chrysopighi, as it is commonly named. Its progress, though, was to be interrupted violently when, in summer 1645, the Turks commenced the siege of Chania. Philotheos Skouphos, a notable icon painter, was the abbot of Chrysopighi in those years. Philotheos had been taught the art of painting at Chania and in all likelihood he maintained a studio at the monastery. However, no icons of his have been preserved at Chrysopighi, only in Zante, where he refuged after the fall of Chania. Those works rank him among the most important icon painters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The documents in the Venetian archives have revealed another side of Philotheos' personality. He was not only a great painter but a good fighter, too. He fought bravely against the Turks with a group of monks, barricaded inside Chrysopighi, and stood out against the plans of the enemy. He managed to evade with great difficulty and get to the Ionian islands, taking the valuables of Chrysopighi with him so that they wouldn't be siezed by the Turks.

Chrysopighi is among the holy establishments which suffered the gravest hardships by each successive conqueror. In 1692, following the capture of Crete by the Turks, Venetian Motsenigos disembarked at the island and made his first effort to repulse the Turks. His effort failed and on sailing away he burnt Chrysopighi down, so that it would not be used as a fortress by his enemies, the Turks. The following years were very tough. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople saw to unite Chrysopighi with the nearby (now deserted) monastery of Saint Eleutherios at the village of Mournies. Chrysopighi remained deserted for years and was restored in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the Kapsalonis brothers who settled there as monks.

Because of its location close to Chania,

where the Janissaries lived, it was often sacked and many monks were butchered. Such an incident had taken place before the 1821 revolution. That revolution was the cause of the monastery's destruction and devastation. From the 1830's on, Chrysopighi played an important religious role. Its abbots became successive bishops at the diocese of Cydonia (Chania). Its decay started after 1900 and by the beginning of the 1970's it had come close to dissolution. The nuns' settlement put new life into this sacred place.

### SARAKINAS' AGHIA MON I

It lies close to the village of Mournies and its architecture is strongly influenced by the architectural style of the monastic centres on Mount Athos. Tradition has it that the monastery was built soon after the reconquest of Crete by the Byzantines, after 150 years' subjugation by the Arab Saracens. The Saracen governor's palace is said to have been there, surrounded by fertile lands. The Byzantine General and later Emperor Nicephorus Phocas ceded it to his friend Saint Athanasios the Athonite, who built a small monastery on the site. That monastery was given the name of "Sarakinas" because of the fact that Sarakinas had his seat there. Athanasios was the founder of the monastery of Meghisti Lavra on Mount Athos, which he founded with the spoils of the Saracens of Chandax (Heraklion).

Our research in the archives has proved that the monastery had belonged to a family of the district, the members of which ceded it to the monastery of Athos in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What had happened prior to the 16<sup>th</sup> century is not known. After the cession, however, a long dispute followed for the ownership of Sarakinas' monastery, between the monastery of Meghisti Lavra and the monastery of Aghia Triatha of the Mourtaros. The claims of the monastery of Meghisti Lavra were declared to be right and the rich Cretan monastery became its possession.

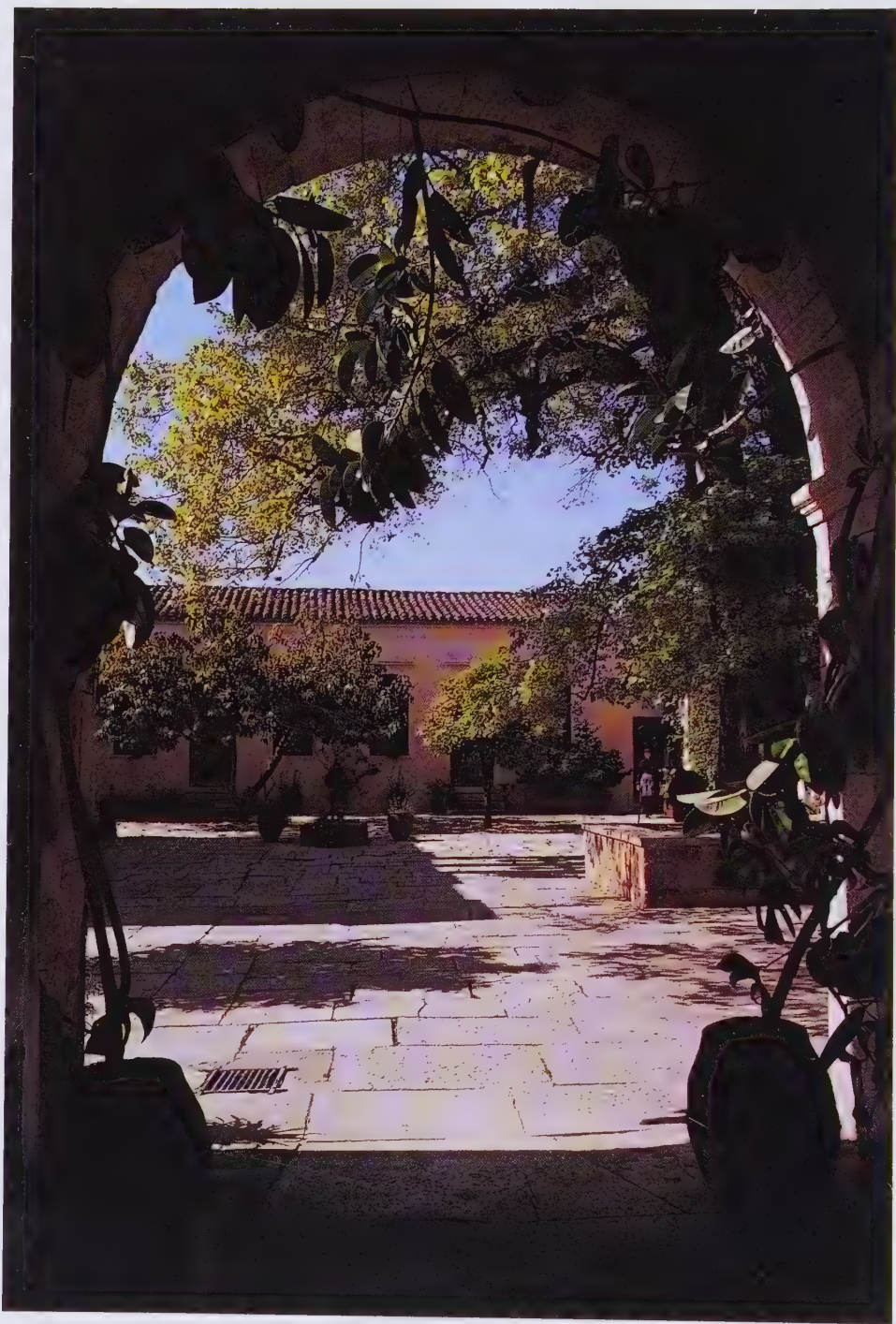
189. Saint Basil. From an old wooden sanctuary door of the Chrysopighi Convent.

190. Saint Nicholas. Icon by the painter Emm. Skorthilis (17<sup>th</sup> c.). Convent of Chrysopighi.

191. The Dormition of Theotokos. Detail from an icon of the Convent of Chrysopighi (16<sup>th</sup> c.).







It has been functioning as a monastic dependency since then. It was resided by a deputation of five monks in the past. Today only the supervising monk lives there, who comes from Mount Athos.

The vestiges of the monastery of **Aghios Eleutherios** are also at Mournies. The triple-apsed main church as well as the ruins of vaulted buildings of the Venetian period are still standing. It was the parochial church of the village a few years ago and Eleutherios Venizelos, the greatest politician of modern Greece, was baptized there.

The church of the old monastery of **Prophet Helias** stands near the village of Mournies, an impressive simple-aisled building, near which very few vestiges of the old monastery (traces of the foundation) are still visible.

The visitor can ask the residents about the passable dirt-road leading to a region full of monastic memories: the old convent of **Aghia Kyriaki**, which has been subject to the convent of Chrysopighi at least since the 17th century and which is now being restored on the Chrysopighi nuns' initiative. A foot-path starts out from the entrance of Chrysopighi and leads to the rocky hillsides south to Aghia Kyriaki. A hundred meters farther up one comes upon the cavernous church of Saint Antonios, which was an old hermitage.

Starting out from the same village (Mournies) one can likewise visit the deserted monastery of **Aghia Triatha** at Pervolia in the province of Cydonia. This monastery is a dependency of the monastery of Sinai. Although nobody resides there today, it is worth admiring the old olive-press of the monastery which denotes its character as a dependency that had to supply the central monastery (Sinai) with products (olive oil) and money.

### CHURCHES AND OTHER RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS

From Chania one can visit some other significant Byzantine monuments of the region. The village of Alikianos on the foot of the White Mountains is only 12 kms distant from the town. Saint George's church, built in 1243, is still standing at the village. The frescoes were painted by the painter Paul Provatas in 1430. On the entrance to the church there was a memorial inscription reading "This is the place which Barbarossa passed by". It



192. View of the Convent of Chrysopighi through the main gateway.

193. Christ Enthroned. Icon of the 17th c. at the Convent of Chrysopighi.





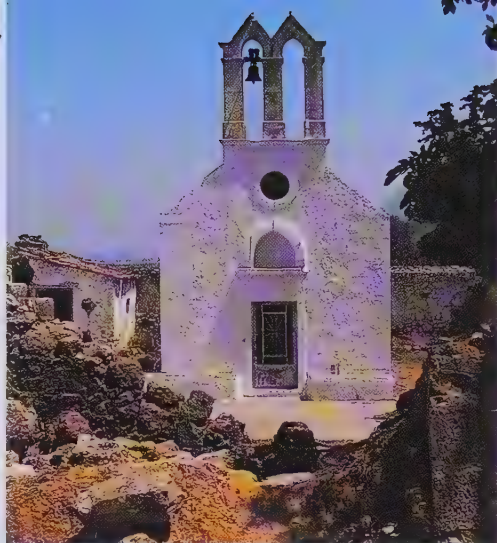
194. View of Aghia Moni (Sarakinas' Holy Monastery).

195. The church of Prophet Helias. It lies close to the village of Mournies.

196. Hermitages close to the Monastery of Aghia Kyriaki (dependency of Chrysopighi).







refers to the terrible pirate who pillaged Crete during the Middle Ages. Between the villages of Alikianós and Kouphos, in a vast orchard, one can see the large beautiful church of Zoothochos Pighi (Life-giving Source) which is believed to have been built by the Cretan Saint Ioannis the Hermit or Sranger in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

From Chania one can also commence an interesting trip to the province of Apokoronas. Near the village of Stylos there are the ruins of the monastery of Saint John the Theologian, which was a dependency of the famous homonymous monastery of the island of Patmos. The monastery lies within the archaeological site of Aptera. You can pause at the village of Stylos to visit the imposing, due to its large size and its architecture, church of Monastira (or the Virgin Zerviotissa). It was built in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Byzantine Period of Crete. From Stylos one can drive to Kyriakoselia where there is the Byzantine fortress of Saint Nikolaos. This fortress was the raiding base of the Cretan revolutionaries when, in the years 1217-1236, they fought against the Venetians, supported by the Emperor of Nice, John Vatatzis. Saint Nikolaos' church was built in the 11th century and was painted in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The wall paintings are wonderful.

There are also frescoed churches at Fre (Saint George), at Alikambos (the Virgin Mary frescoed by the great painter Ioannis Pagonomenos), at Kournas (Saint George and Saint Irini) and others.



197. St George's Monastery at Charondia, close to Mournies. During the Venetian rule it belonged to the Bournazos family. The Bishop Anthimos Bournazos dedicated it to the Monastery of Aghia Triatha of the Mourtaros in the 18th century.

198. The church of Theotokos between the villages of Kouphos and Alikianos in the province of Cydonia.

199. Panaghia Zerviotissa, close to the village of Stylos, Apokoronas (photo: Chr. Stephanakis).



## From Chania to Kissamos and Selinon

**T**he trip from Chania to Kastelli in Kissamos offers the chance to visit the big fortified monastery of Gonia as well as a number of important Post-Byzantine monuments in the wider area. The monastery of Gonia is only 24 kms from Chania. In order to get there, take the highway Chania - Kissamos and, at the village of Kolymbari, turn right. The monasteries on the cape of Spatha (Saint George's at Menies, Saint Ioannis' at Ghiona) are situated in an exceptionally beautiful area, yet a special (4WD) car is needed to go there. An earth road from the village of Rothopou leads to those two monasteries. It would be a great luck if you were able to visit Saint Ioannis' at Ghiona on 29 August; the feast held on that day is famous. There is no motorway to Saint Paul's monastery. You can either walk for about half an hour from Ghiona or hire a boat from Kolymbari or Kastelli in Kissamos. In this case you will have the chance to visit a few other religious places at Akrotiri, like the ancient temple of Dictynna.

The rest of the monasteries in the area, except for the monastery of Parthenon at Kastelli and the monastery of Chrysoskalitissa, are not active today. The visit to the frescoed churches, as well as to the monastery of Aghii Pateres at Azoghires is not always possible, as the churches are closed. Consequently, the priests of the villages or the attendants of the churches should be contacted and asked for the keys.

### MONASTERY OF GONIA

It lies near the village of Kolymbari, in a picturesque area, on the cove (gonia) of an almost oblong bay. It is one of the largest and best preserved monasteries on Crete. It is built in the form of a fortress and its "katholikon" (main church) is a triple-apsed church with two chapels, as it is common in the district of Chania (monasteries of Aghia Triatha, Gouverneto, Chrysopighi, Aghios Eleutherios). Before the main entrance and just opposite it, is the old fountain of the monastery with a nice inscription:

**O SPRING FLOWING WITH GRACE  
POUR WATER FOR ME  
BECAUSE WATER IS VITAL AND  
SWEETEST TO EVERYBODY**

Looking above the fountain, high up the opposite mountainside, one can see a double-aisled church, which is today the church of the monastery's graveyard. It is the first "katholikon" of Gonia. A small monastery had existed on the site, the monks of which, together with monks from other monasteries, formed the community of the large monastery

of Gonia. Many small monasteries had existed in the area prior to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The monks of these monasteries resolved to found a large monastery, well organized according to the coenobitic rule. Such monasteries were:

1. The monastery of Aghia Eirini, close to Kolymbari. Today it is deserted, yet the buildings are still standing, as restoration works were carried out there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

2. The monastery of Gra Kera, at the settlement of Gra Kera, also deserted today.

3. The monastery of Aghios Georghios at Menies. It is an important monastery on the cape of Spatha, next to an ancient sanctuary. The road to it is long and rough. It is accessible either by a 4WD car (from the village of Rothopou) or by boat till the cape. From there a few minutes' walk is necessary. A defensive tower is near the main church, where the monks refuted in periods of pirate raids. Vaulted buildings of the Venetian period are still standing. The church is frescoed.

4. The monastery of Aghios Ioannis at Ghiona. It is deserted today. The earth-road



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from the village of Rothopou to the monastery is relatively better than the road to Menies.

5. Peter and Paul's monastery. It is a coastal monastery with a frescoed church. It is half an hour's walk from the monastery of Aghios Ioannis at Ghiona.

6. The monastery of Aghios Ioannis the Hermit at Spilia. It is both a monastery and a hermitage. The church of Saint John is inside a large cave at the village of Spilia.

The monastery of Gonia was the meeting place of the anchorites and hermits of the region. It grew rapidly during the last decades of the Venetian rule, though its development was interrupted by the Turkish assault in June 1645. The Turks disembarked on the shore close to the monastery and that was the beginning of the misfortunes of the monastic community. Monk Vlassios from Cyprus was the founder of the monastery. Nevertheless, important churchmen were monks at Gonia, such as the hymnographer Venethiktos Tzangarolos. The building works were assisted by significant members of the Cretan society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, such as the Mormoris family.

Following the capture of Crete by the Turks



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200. View of the Monastery of Gonia.

201. St Ioannis at Ghiona. An old monastery and a new important religious place. The bay of Kissamos is visible.





202. An angel. From the sanctuary doors of the Monastery of Hodeghitria Gonia.





203. *Panaghia*. From the sanctuary doors of the Monastery of Gonia, Kissamos.





the monks made attempts to reconstruct the monastery and save its property. Isaiah Diakopoulos, an active abbot, drew up the "Typikon" of the monastery which defined the mode of its functioning. Among others, it made provision for the teaching of letters and arts at the monastery! It is one of the few monasteries of which we know the names of all the abbots from the early years of the Turkish occupation up to the present day. The 1821 revolution was a turning point in the future of the monastery. It was pillaged by the Turks, yet the monks had foreseen it and had sent forty valuable icons and other sacred vessels of the monastery away to other Greek regions. The icons were returned only after the end of the revolution. The monastery played a significant part in the 1866 uprising, too, during which the Hieromonks Parthenios Perithis and Parthenios Kelaithis distinguished themselves. The monastery was sacked once again. Nevertheless, as luck would have it, this monastery was the first on Crete to feel the joy of freedom, just as it was the first to experience the advent of the Turkish army in June 1645. In 1897 the Greek Colonel Timoleon Vasos disembarked near the monastery. The day of

204. *St Paul's old monastery on the cape of Spatha. (Photo: Chr. Stephanakis).*

205. *Menies, on the cape of Spatha. The old monastery of St George.*

206. *Venetian buildings at St John's, Ghiona.*

207, 208. *Details from the icon of the Crucifixion, 17th c. Monastery of Gonia.*



liberation was near. Crete was declared an autonomous state in the following year and in 1913 it was united with the Greek mainland, after hard and bloody fights.

At the monastery of Gonia, one can pay a visit to the museum, which is rich in icons and manuscripts. Among those icons are:

Crucifixion by the painter Constantinos Palaeocapas.

Saint Nikolaos by the same painter bearing the date 1637.

Joseph's History by Neilos, dated back to 1642 (a fine multi-faced icon).

Saint Nikolaos (besides Palaeocapas' icon there is another one, dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

Saint Nikolaos, dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed to be handiwork of the painter Andreas Ritzos.

The Transfiguration, dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

Virgin the Merciful, dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, most probably work of the painter Andreas Ritzos.

Christ the High Priest, of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, most probably work of Andreas Ritzos.

There are still other valuables in the museum, sacred vessels and manuscripts, such as two old Codes with plentiful data regarding the history of the monastery.

## THE BYZANTINE MONASTERY OF AGHIA VARVARA

The journey to Kissamos should not be terminated without visiting Rotonda, a beautiful Byzantine church, the former see of the bishop of Kissamos, as well as the old monastery of Aghia Varvara at Lantziana. It occupies a beautiful site, choked with vegetation, at the small settlement of Lantziana. Only vestiges of the Patriarchal and Imperial Monastery of Aghia Varvara survive today. Following the conquest of Crete by the Venetians (1211) the monastery was seized by the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople, who leased its lands to Cretan people.

Today vestiges of the church and other buildings are visible. Among the rich wall decoration preserved in the ruined (and roofless) church, one can discern the figure of the monk-founder of the monastery.

Noone knows when the monastery was dissolved.





## MONASTERY OF CHRYSOSKALITISSA



The trip to the western part of Crete continues through the beautiful Kastanochoria (chestnut villages) in the province of Kisamos, until the visitor reaches the western extremity of the island. The monastery of Chrysoskalitissa is on a sheer-sided rock where the sea meets the land. The visitor can go up the stairs, walk around the sacred place and be filled with awe inspired by the local traditions. It is said that one of the steps leading to the top of the defensive rock is made of gold, sinners, however, are not able to see it. Others believe that the gold step had existed only in former times, not today; the monks were compelled to sell it in the early years of the Turkish rule in order to assist the Patriarchate of Constantinople to pay off its debts. It seems that such stories have been heard in this, once, deserted region, for many centuries. The Venetian maps refer to the monastery by the name of Counoskalitissa.

In the course of the Venetian rule a monastery had functioned there, though our knowledge about it is scanty. We only know that a Turkish traveller had come upon a large coenobitic monastery in the neighbourhood, dedicated to Saint Nikolaos. It lay on the site of the present-day church of Saint Panteleimon. Obviously both monasteries were active in the early years of the Turkish occupation. Later on they were deserted and remained so for many centuries. It is not known whether hermits lived in the area in those years (Turkish rule), I believe, however, that it had so happened in earlier years.

The solitude and desolation of Chrysoskalitissa lasted until mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. A monk from Sfakia was the first to settle there, however, the monastery never reached a period of prosperity. At times it was incorporated with the monastery of Gonia and members of its community occasionally lived there as supervisors.

Today there are two monks in the community.

The visitor can admire the harmonious adjustment of the old buildings to the defensive rock. Many new buildings have interfered with the landscape, but, fortunately, the character of the monastery hasn't changed completely and a few typical features from its old form are still preserved.



In older times the whole western coast of Crete in the vicinity of Chrysoskalitissa was deserted. There were only a few summer cottages for the farmers. The monastery was then the only shelter for the fishermen and also for the seamen who combated with the stormy sea.

### OTHER MONUMENTS

The trip to the provinces of Kissamos and Selinon is a real challenge, as some of the most important frescoed churches on Crete are in this region. Driving westwards from the monastery of Gonia, one will meet the imposing building of the **Orthodox Academy** of Crete very shortly. The Academy is a very active intellectual Christian establishment, where international meetings, symposiums and conventions are organized. From Kolymbari, close to the monastery of Gonia, one can visit the village of **Spilia**, where there is a wonderful collection of Post-Byzantine icons, and the impressive cave of the local Saint, Ioannis the Hermit, with a church inside it. From Spilia one can drive to the village of **Dracona**, with its 14<sup>th</sup> century church dedicated to Saint Stephanos. The church is frescoed and among the representations there are scenes from the life of the Saint. It is situated among huge trees, in an idyllic environment. Very close, next to the village of **Episkopi**, the important church of Michael the Archangel, known as "Rotonda of Kissamos", still survives. It had been a bishopric see since the early Christian times and amazing samples of the art of the time can be seen there. Sections of the mosaic floor have been preserved along with a stone font, indicating that an early Christian baptistry had functioned at the site. Inside the church successive layers of paintings from different periods have been uncovered. It seems that the church was painted more than five times! The architectural style of the church is very impressive. The large rectangular building complex surrounds the circular church which is dominated by a dome. The road from Episkopi to the west leads to the village of **Deliana**. The church of the village has fine wall paintings. Among them one can notice the Punishment of the Damned, painted in the way that the Cretan painter of that time had visualized it. From Deliana one can go to the village of **Gra**

209. *The Monastery of Chrysoskalitissa, on the western coast of Crete.*

210. *The entrance to the Monastery of Chrysoskalitissa. The tradition reports that one of the steps leading to the top of the rock was (or is...) gold.*

211. *View of the Monastery of Chrysoskalitissa.*







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212. Rhotonda in the province of Kissamos.

213. The ruins of the Byzantine Monastery of St Barbara at the village of Lantziana, Kissamos.

214. The cave of St Ioannis the Hermit at the village of Spilia, Kissamos.

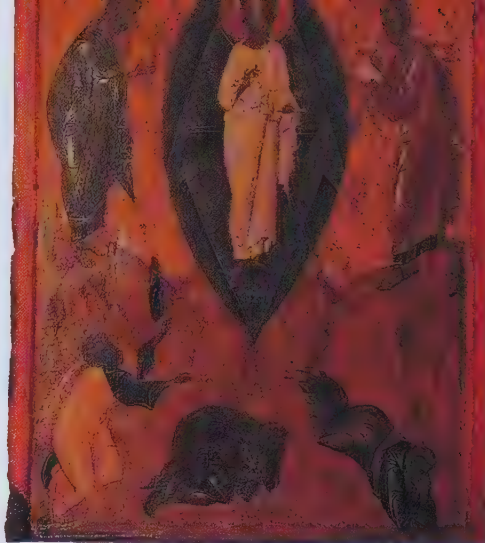
215. Menies. The church and the defensive tower of St George's Monastery.

**Kera**, where an homonymous small monastery had functioned. Around the church there are some restored buildings. The church is simple-aisled with carvings in relief on the door-frame.

After you have returned to **Kolymbari** you can continue your visit to the monuments of the region. From Kolymbari drive to the west towards Kastelli. If you want to visit the deserted monasteries at Menies, Ghiona and Aghios Pavlos, you have to turn right, towards the village of Rothopou. There you can inquire about the rest of the way to the above mentioned monasteries, still the visitor should keep in mind that a 4WD car is necessary because it is a rough road.

Follow the next fork, to the right again, and





you will reach the frescoed church of Saint Marina at the village of **Ravdoucha**. Another fork (to the right) leads to Enneachoria (Nine Villages), Kissamos. You can pause at the village of **Topolia**, where a hermitage had been functioning till the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a main church dedicated to Christ Crucified. Some notable wall paintings are still preserved in this church.

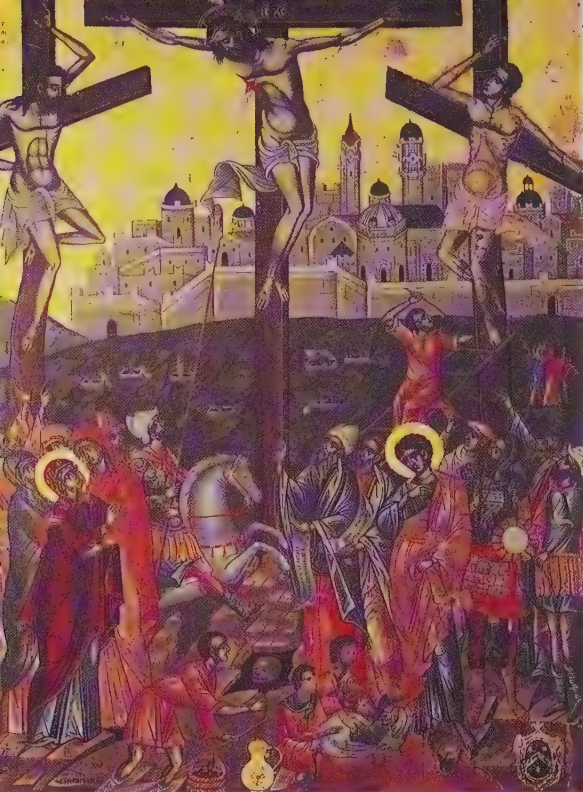
The drive is enjoyable and huge chestnut-trees are to be seen on the way. At the village of **Kouneni** you can visit the frescoed churches of Michael the Archangel and Saint George (double-aisled) and then follow the passable earth road leading to Chrysoskalitissa.

216. St John the Forerunner. From an icon of the Monastery of Gonia.

217. The Transfiguration. Museum at the Monastery of Gonia (15<sup>th</sup> century).

218. Mural paintings from the church of the village of Deliana, Kissamos.





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219. *The Crucifixion. Icon by the icon painter Constantinos Palaecapap (17th century).*

220. *Saint Nikolaos (15th century). Monastery of Gonia.*

221. *Wall painting from Deliana, Kissamos. Punishment of the Damned.*

222. *The old building materials were used in the construction of the church (Photo: Chr. Stephanakis).*

223. *Monastery of Aghii Pateres at the village of Azoghires. The carved wooden iconostasis.*

224. *View of the Monastery of Aghii Pateres.*

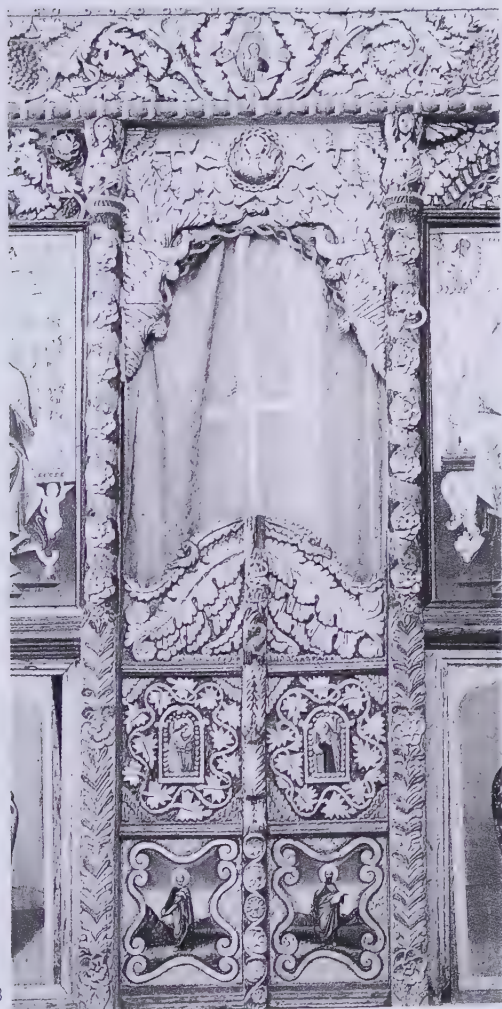
## IN THE PROVINCE OF SELINON

The province of Selinon offers abundant opportunities to the visitor who searches the Byzantine memories of Crete. It is one of the  
 220 richest areas of Crete in frescoed churches. It

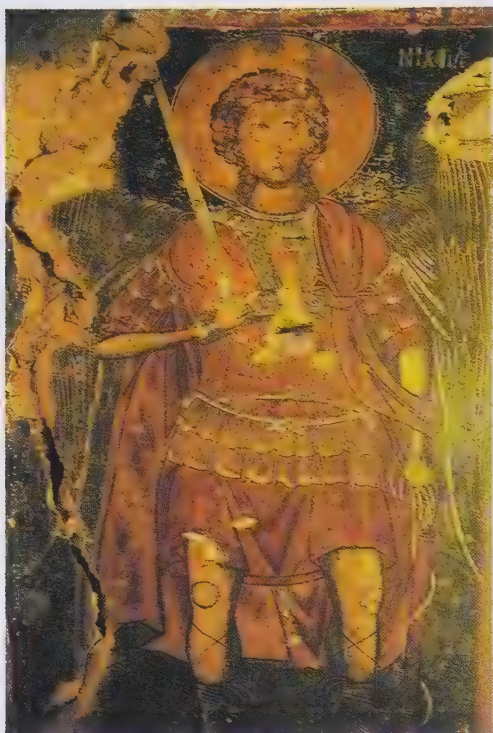


takes a lot of time to visit all the frescoed churches of the district. They are more than 130! We suggest that the visitor should follow the road from the village of Tavronitis to the South (Palaeochora, Soughia) and, if possible, visit a few typical examples of frescoed churches on the way.

At the settlement of **Anisaraki**, in the province of Kanthanos, there is the church of Saint Anna, where there is a depiction of the patrons of the church. Saint Anna nursing the Virgin is depicted on the northern wall and Saint George in the usual iconographic type (on horseback) is portrayed on the western arch. The churches of Saint Paraskevi and Saint George are at the same settlement.





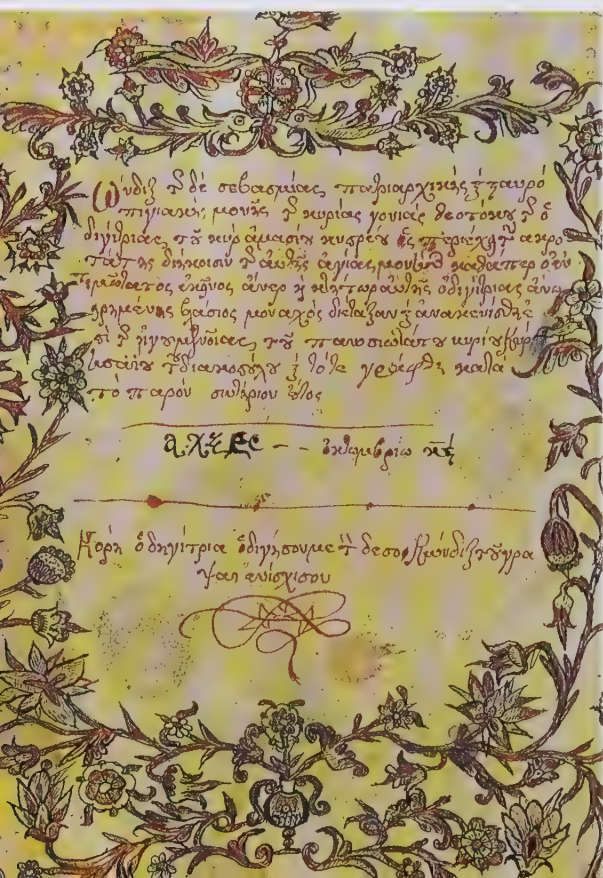


At the settlement of **Trachiniakos** there are four frescoed churches: Saint Paraskevi with representations from the Punishment of the Damned, Prophet Helias, Saint Photis and Saint John. Building materials from an early Christian basilica, which had existed on the same site, were found within the surrounding wall of Saint John's church.

The frescoes of the Virgin's church at the village of **Kanthanos** have also been preserved. The churches of Christ and Saint George are still standing at the village of **Plemeniana**; the former with an engraving dated 1362 and the latter with frescoes of the 15th century, among which are traces of the patrons and scenes from the Punishment of the Damned.

In the southern part of the province, at **Soughia**, one can see vestiges of the wonderful early-Christian basilicas. The mosaic floor of one of them is a remarkable example of early-Christian art. It includes geometrical decorative patterns together with Christian symbols. The visitor can also see the beautiful church of Saint Eirini with its peculiar dome in the same area.

At **Lissos** you can visit the archaeological site as well as two small, yet impressive churches, the church of the Virgin and the church of Saint Kirykos. The church of the Virgin is built upon the ruins of an early-Christian basilica and, probably, very close to the ancient sanctuary of Aesculapius. The Cretan craftsman of the 14<sup>th</sup> century found a lot of building materials among the ruins of the ancient monuments and made good use of them. In the construction of the church he used parts of the ancient church, the Byzantine church and the Roman antiquities of the area. Ancient capitals, sections of a Roman sarcophagus and other items have been incorporated in the church. The same happened with the church of Saint Kirykos, which is also built on top of the ruins of a Byzantine basilica.



225. Michael the Archangel. Wall painting from the church of Aghii Pateres at the village of Floria, Kissamos.  
226. The handwritten Code of the Monastery of Gonia.

## To the environs of Rethymnon

**R**ethymnon itself offers the chance to walk around a town which has retained its medieval character and its colour. Furthermore, in the vicinity of Rethymnon there are monasteries which were built in the Venetian times and preserve basic features of the Byzantine architecture. Saint Eirini's convent was restored on Theodoros Tzethakis' initiative, the dear departed Metropolitan of Rethymnon, and is an excellent example of fortress-like monastery with peculiar features, like the old main church of the monastery, Aghia Eirini, which is cut inside the rock.

In order to get to the monastery, follow the road to Roussospitiand and continue a short distance past the today deserted monastery of Chalevi.

Great efforts have been made recently to reconstruct the monastery of Arsani. From there, you can proceed to the big monastery of Arkathi, the monastery - symbol of freedom.

### MONASTERY OF ARSANI

It is situated to the east of Rethymnon, close to the village of Pangalochori. It is an old monastery, proved by historical sources to have functioned in the closing years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I believe that it was established in the course of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Byzantine period of Crete (961-1204) by a monk who answered to the name of Arsenius, and the monastery was named after him (this was also true with the monastery of Arkathi, Areti and others).

By the name of Arsani it has been known since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as it appears in a letter of the Patriarch of Constantinople Meletios Pigas. Saint George's church, the main church of the monastery, was consecrated at that time. It is most likely that the old Byzantine monastery had been deserted, because of the pirate raids which caused big problems to the people of the coastal settlements, and had been restored prior to 1600, when scores of monasteries were reconstructed throughout the island. The Monks Gerasimos and Philotheos are mentioned in an old manuscript as the founders of the monastery. Apparently they were its restorers.

The monastery of Arsani started growing at a brisk pace after 1600. In the Venetian documents it appears as the receptor of donations through Orthodox Christians' wills. The lintel of the refectory bears the date 1645, which means that, shortly before the Turkish assault against Crete, building works had been carried out at Arsani. The refectory is one of the most im-

portant buildings of the monastery, as it is shown in a drawing of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Those works obviously ended after the capture of the region by the Turks, in 1646. A poet of the time recounts that the abbot of Arsani, Joseph, cunningly tried to poison Choussein Pasha. He went through the motions of taking presents to his tent, which he had poisoned before. However, the Pasha gave his dog first before tasting himself. The dog died and the plot was uncovered...

Information regarding the following years reveals that the monastery went through many hardships, either heavy taxes or oppressions by the Turks. It seems, nevertheless, that the monastic community made great efforts to support the local society by assisting the establishment of schools in Rethymnon, around 1800. The contribution of the monastery to education continued during the following years, until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the 1821 revolution a school functioned within the monastery, as recorded by the English traveller Rombert Pashley, who visited Crete in 1834.

Its cells and many other buildings were destroyed by a strong earthquake in 1856 and a few years later the monks devoted both themselves and the property of the monastery to the great liberating 1866 revolution.

The monastery is still active. The visitor can admire the small ecclesiastical museum which includes valuables from both the older and the recent history of Arsani. He can also see the icon exhibition of the monastery, with important Cretan icons, such as the icons of







Saint George and Saint Nikolaos. They are old icons restored in 1804.

### CONVENT OF AGHIA EIRINI MONASTERY OF CHALEVI

Many, either small or big, monasteries existed in the vicinity of Rethymnon in the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among them were the monasteries of Chalevi and Aghia Eirini which both went through long periods of desolation. The monastery of Chalevi is deserted even today and its buildings remain piles of ruins... Only the simple-aisled church of Theotokos is standing. Among the vestiges of the buildings one can see features of the popular Cretan architecture of the past centuries. The monastery was erected upon the ruins of an old fortified establishment.

The monastery was active throughout the Turkish rule, in fact it was stavropighion - patriarchal for a long period of time. It was dissolved in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The convent of Aghia Eirini constitutes a good example of Christian monument which, after serious damage (that marked its centuries-old course), regained its old glamour, having undergone systematic reconstruction works. It is an old Byzantine monastery, though its traces have been lost through the centuries. It's likely that it was founded by Byzantine anchorites who lived in the nearby caves. The site around the monastery was cut into the rock and cisterns were created that way. Even a big part of the church is cut into the rock. Following the



227. St Nikolas (1804). Monastery of Arsani.

228. Saint John Chrysostom. From a sanctuary door of the Monastery of Arsani.





conquest of Crete by the Venetians it remained a significant monastery, with lots of estates and workers who cultivated the land. The name of one of its servants is mentioned in a Venetian document dated 1362!

What happened after that year and till the verge of the Turkish conquest is not known. In the early years of the Turkish rule the first Metropolitan of Crete, Neophytos Patellaros, stayed there (at the metochi of the monastery at the nearby small village of Anoghia).

The monastery of Aghia Eirini functioned till the 1821 revolution. From then on, however, it started dwindling. In the following years the income from its lands was put up for the maintenance of the schools of the prefecture of Rethymnon. It was destroyed during the 1866 revolution and in the late years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a seminary functioned there. A long period of desolation followed, during which the buildings fell down and the monastery was deserted. Even the church was in danger of



229. Convent of Aghia Eirini. General view in the time of reconstruction.

230. Aghia Eirini. View of the convent.

231. The building complex of Aghia Eirini.







turning into ruins. The first attempt for reconstruction was empirical, it concerned only the church and started in 1970. The big new start for this monastery was made in 1989. The then Metropolitan of Rethymnon and Aulopotamos, Theodoros, decided to revive the sacred place. He installed three nuns there and the restoration of the ruins started very soon with complete respect for the place and its architecture. Before long, an amazing convent came into light, which dominates over the rock of Aghia Eirini, reminding one of an old fortress. All the buildings have been restored, even the old olive-press and the stable, the usage of which has -naturally- been altered.

Today it has a female community with five nuns who make sacerdotal vestments of exceptional art.

### MONASTERY OF KOUMBES THREE MONASTERIES

The vestiges of the monasteries which survived in the surroundings of Rethymnon, along with the old churches, lead to the traces of an important Christian civilization that had developed in the area since the early Byzantine years. At that time, the town of Rethymnon was in decay; the today surviving Byzantine monuments were not inside the town but in its neighbourhood. Theotokos' church at Chrononastiri has fine wall decor while twelve frescoed churches have survived only in the vicinity of Rethymnon.

Most of the monasteries were established around the town in the course of the Venetian occupation. A good number of them are not extant today. There are only ruins and place-names, such as that of "Three Monasteries" which preserves the recollection of an unknown monastic life. A fine sample of Christian art survives in the wider area of the "Three Monasteries", at the settlement of Galou, on the road Rethymnon - Spili. It is the upper floor church of Theotokos, which started being restored in recent years.

Among the monasteries that functioned throughout the Venetian period was the monastery of Christ, on the hill of Koumbes in the vicinity of Rethymnon, in the western part of the town. The name of the monastery during the Venetian period is not known, in all likelihood the monastery of the Virgin of Herimitianoï had functioned there. It was deserted in 1646 and became active again in 1935, when a monk

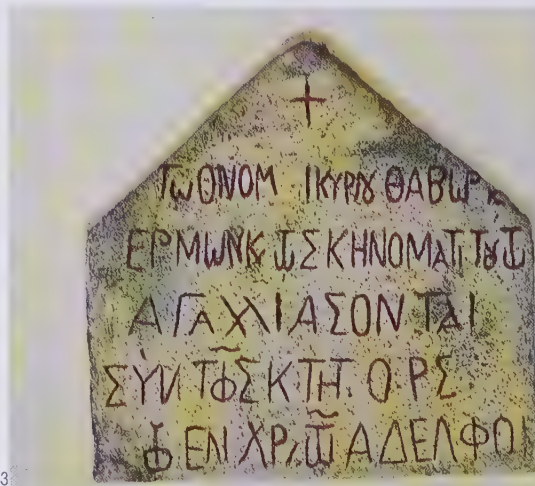


from Mount Athos settled there. It was then that the present-day convent was constructed.

Today it has a female community. The nuns occupy themselves with the painting of Byzantine icons.

232. Another view of the Convent of Aghia Eirini.

233. Inscription from the Convent of the Transfiguration, Koumbes.





34. Zoothochos Pighi (Life-giving Source). Church close to the village of Galou, Rethymnon.



### MONASTERY OF ARKATHI

It is the most celebrated and one of the most impressive Cretan monasteries. Although injured by the holocaust of 1866, the entire building complex of the monastery has survived and constitutes a typical example of monasterial architecture, as it developed on Crete during the late years of the Venetian rule. The monastery is 23 kms distant from Rethymnon and dominates over a low plateau, where many smaller monasteries had functioned, which became subject to the big monastery in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Before arriving at the monastery the visitor is impressed by its large size and its architecture, which make it distinguishable within the surrounding area. The old tiled roads echo its former grandeur, roads partly preserved, as they were restored and reconstructed in recent years. The ruins of the stables are to be seen before entering the fortified establishment, to the west of the monastery. They weren't built at the same time as the rest buildings of the monastery, because, for defence reasons, all the activities of the monks had to be gathered within the central building. Not only the living quarters but also the storerooms for the storage of the agricultural products, the facilities for their processing, and even the mule-stalls were in the main building. In this way, the monks did not have to go outside the fortress for any reason, especially in periods of tension and siege. When the Turks took possession of Crete, that reason no longer existed.

235. Arkathi. Picture of the building complex.

236. Arkathi. The church of the Saints Constantine and Helen.





Therefore and due to the increased needs of the monastery, the building now visible in front of the entrance was erected.

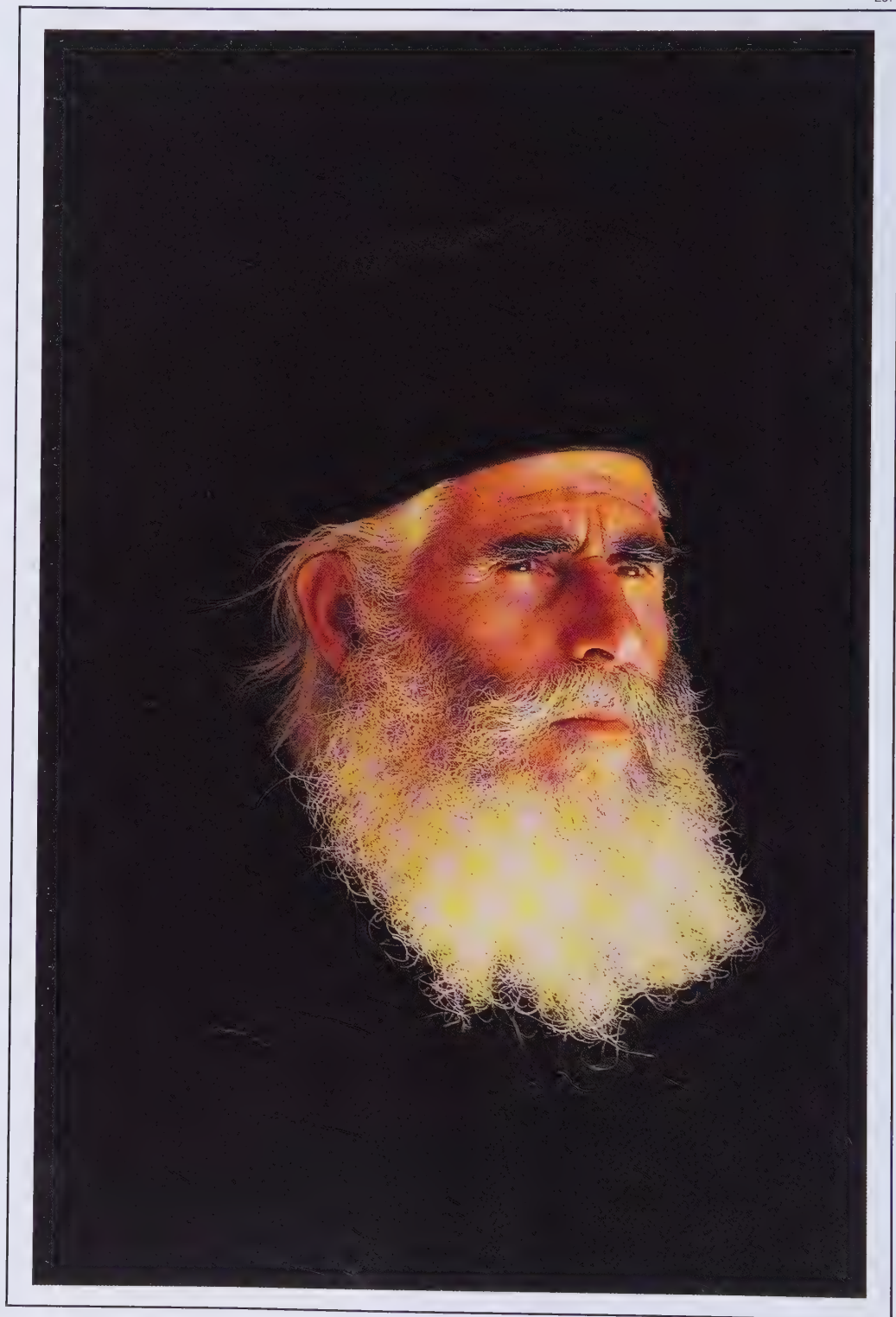
The main entrance is elaborate. It was rebuilt according to its old design in 1870, four years after the terrible damage of 1866. It had been built in 1693, still a similar gate must have existed at the same site before. The monastery had two large gateways, one at the northeastern part and another at the western part of it. The western (main gateway) led to Rethymnon and was called "Rethymnon gate". The other led to Heraklion (then Megalo Kastro) and was called "Kastron gate". The main entrance leads to the vaulted building, which was called "pylon" in monasterial architecture. Built benches were on both sides of that vaulted building. Visitors and travellers could sit down there and rest if they arrived at the monastery at the time the monks were lying down. The roofed over benches protected them from the weather conditions, from cold or heat. The monks offered them hospitality at that place first, treating them with raki and nuts or a glass of wine.

Pass through the vaulted pylon and you will see the beautiful double-aisled church in front of you, which is dedicated to the Saints Constantine and Helen and to Christ. Its facade reveals the influence of the western architectural currents on Cretan architecture in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The main gateway is on a straight path opposite the entrance to the church so that the worshippers can enter easily and perform their religious duties without disturbing the monks.

The eastern gate was more "informal". The animals carrying supplies passed through it and headed straight to the storerooms without crossing the whole yard and disturbing or littering the place. Besides those gates, the monastery had other secondary ones through which the monks went out to the fields for their farming labours.

The entry to the church reminds one of the past Byzantine grandeur. The devout setting, the dim light and the lighted candles, reflected on the icons and the fine woodcarved iconostasis, create a mystagogic atmosphere. A half-burnt section of the old iconostasis can be seen







at the western side of the church. That's all that has been saved from the 1866 holocaust.

The churchyard is large and comfortable. The vaulted passages with the successive arches retain their former splendour. They are decorative structures, common in monasterial architecture. The living quarters were built at the three sides, the southern, the eastern and the western. The north wing served other needs of the monastic community. The refectory was there, a large building where all the monks dined together when the monastery was coenobitic; the bakery, the storerooms and other rooms of common use were also there. The visitor to these parts of the monastery is impressed by their simplicity and their size. The dim light makes them somehow eerie, which is also due to their desolation. The old guest-house is at the northern side. It had 13 wards and two larger rooms. Hospitality was considered to be the monks' obligation in Greek monasteries. Any visitor arriving at the monastery enjoyed full hospitality (accommodation, food etc.). The revolted against the conquerors were among those who found shelter in the monasteries, hence the monks never asked the visitor who he was, where he came from or where he would go next. When he was ready to leave they gave him bread, cheese, olives and wine enough for about three days... The wine store-room was built at the north-eastern side, holding scores of barrels which contained wine of fine quality. The French traveller



237. Monk of the Monastery of Arkathi.

238. View of the church yard from the NE entrance.

239. Arkathi. The main church.

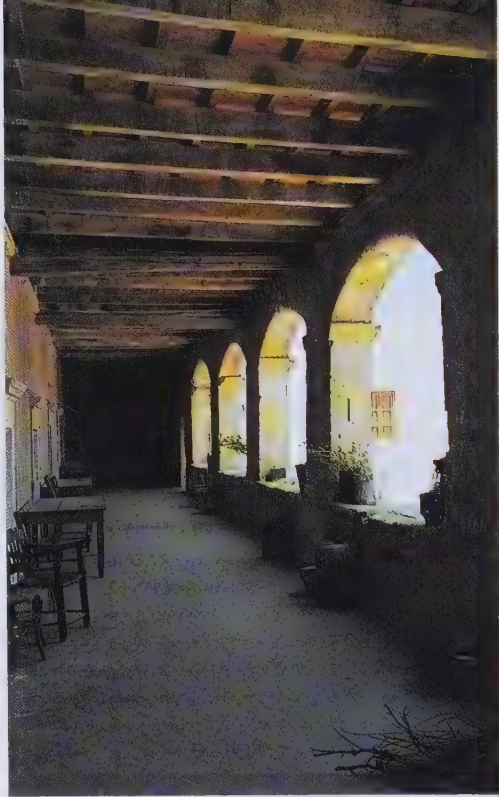
240. Icon of the Mother of God from the Monastery of Arkathi.





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Tournefort (1700) records that one of those barrels contained wine only for the abbot. All the travellers that visited the monastery spoke with admiration about its wine storeroom. They report that it held up to 200 barrels! And, as it appears, all of them were aware of the hospitality the monks offered to the visitors. That wine storeroom had existed till 1866. In that year the Turks laid siege to the monastery. The besieged had stored the gun-powder in a room of the south wing. They were, however, afraid that the besiegers could bore the external wall, hence they carried all the munitions into the fortified building of the wine storeroom. One of the most glorious pages in human history was written at that place. When the danger was near, the free besieged in Arkathi exploded the powder magazine. That act took hundreds of Turks to death, together with the Cretans. The intellectuals in Europe were moved by the self-sacrifice of the people who, in the name of freedom, sacrificed themselves. Amongst those who wrote fervent articles in favour of the subjugated Cretan fighters was Victor Hugo... Today one can see



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the ruins of the once vaulted wine storeroom - powder magazine and leave a flower at the site where those brave people sacrificed themselves, having preferred to die with dignity rather than be enslaved.

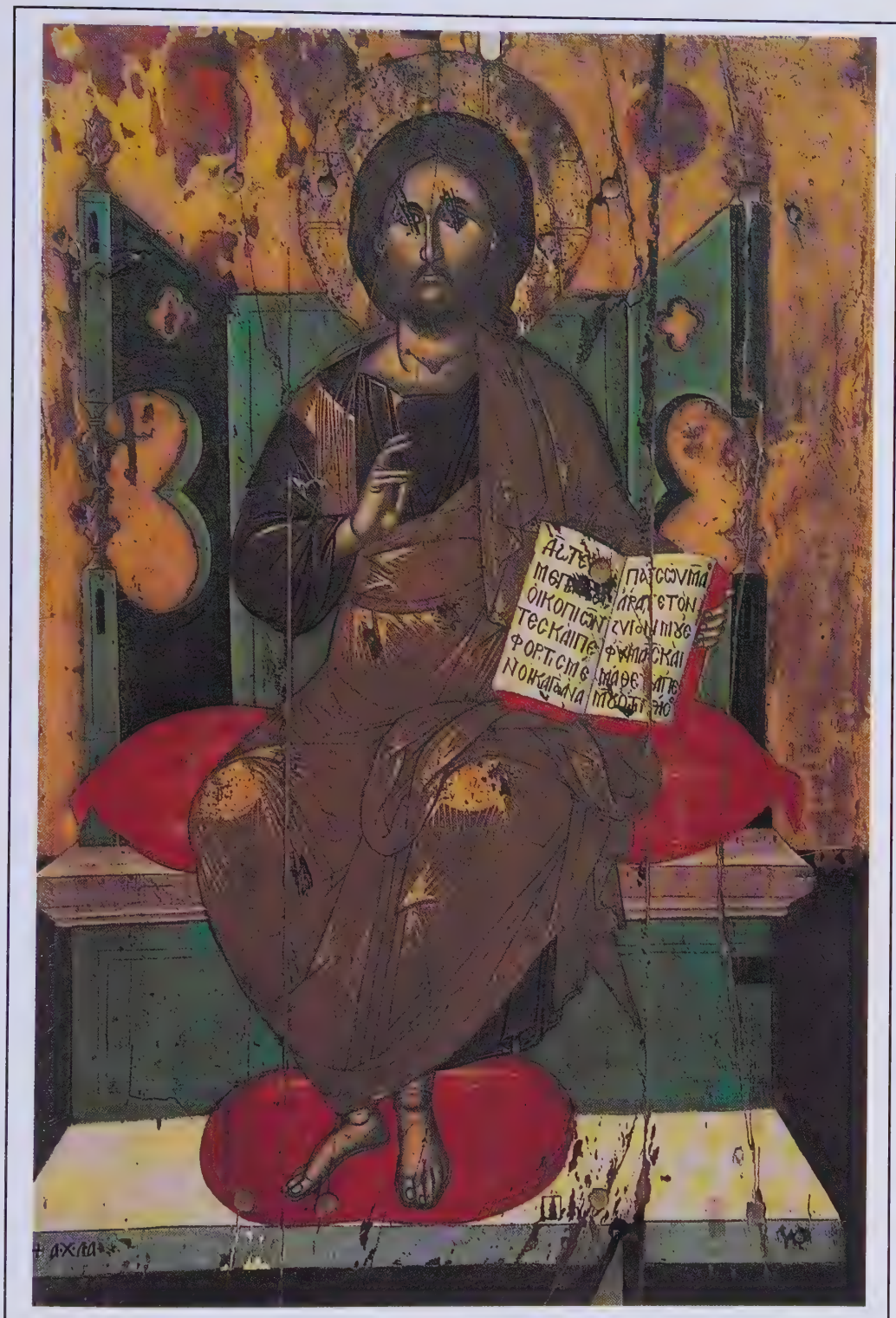
It is most likely that the history of the monastery started in the Byzantine period. A small monastery, which belonged to the Kallergis clan, stood at the site during the Middle Ages. The oldest find of the monastery is a mutilated inscription of the 14<sup>th</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> century which mentions the name of the monastery: Arkathi. That name is owed to the founder or to a restorer who was a monk and had the monastic name of Arkathios.

The first effort to reconstruct the monastery was made in 1572. It was in that year that it

241. Arkathi. The vaulted corridor on the ground floor (western side).

242. The cloister of the upper floor (western side).

243. Christ Enthroned. Icon dated 1631. Museum of the Monastery of Arkathi.





adopted the coenobitic rule. Its active abbot Klimis Chortatzis played a significant part in the development of the monastery. In his days the old church was pulled down and a new, a larger one, was erected at its site. The old church was too small (13.8X3.72 m) to hold the monks and the pilgrims. On the base of the belfry there is the date 1587 which shows when the building was completed. It was then that the facade was built, according to the western architectural style, based on designs of the architect Sebastiano Serlio. Works to finish the rest of the buildings were continued after 1587.

The monastery became a center of letters and arts after the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Its monks copied books, mainly church books, as it is apparent from numerous notes on manuscripts of the time. A school was operated at the monastery and there was also a rich library with works of ancient writers. After 1646, however, the intellectual contribution of the monastery of Arkathi was seriously reduced. It was then captured and plundered by the Turkish army. The monks dispersed and a group of them took the flocks of the monastery and went to the monastery of Vrontisi, on the eastern slopes of Mount Psiloreitis. The conquest of Crete by the Turks was followed by the restoration of the Orthodox hierarchy on the island, which had been abolished by the Venetians. A monk from Arkathi, a very educated person who spoke the Turkish language, was the first Metropolitan of Crete. Arkathi managed to recover soon after the Turkish conquest and gained a unique privilege for a Christian establishment. It was the only monastery which was permitted to ring the bells! Islamism forbade the ringing of the bells strictly and that prohibition was imposed on all regions under Turkish dominion. The monastery of Arkathi was the only exception to the rule.

After the Turkish conquest, the restoration of the buildings commenced. Many of the now surviving buildings date from that time. The

244. Section of the iconostasis of the Monastery of Arkathi which survived the holocaust of 1866.

245. Entrance to the yard of the Refectory with an inscription dated 1687.

246. Arkathi. Saint George, icon of the 17th century.





οὐδὲ  
μενε  
ἀντιμα  
πλοῦν  
φορ

Οὐδὲ ππερ  
κασιν ἄνομ  
πογε οὐδὲ  
κεφαλὴν  
ρσὸν τέτ  
μη μὲν.





monastery acquired great property and a number of smaller monasteries became subject to it. Travellers started visiting it in the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They had heard about its rich library and wanted to get access to it. We don't know what was stolen, lost or damaged in later periods.

Apart from its intellectual contribution, the monastery offered a great deal to the Cretan struggle for liberation. In 1821 it was captured by the Turks, and more specifically, by the savage Aga Gentim Ali. A young monk, however, succeeded in escaping and he informed the Cretan chieftains of the district. A hard battle followed and many Turks were killed and, among them, Gentim Ali himself.

In 1866, as already stated, an incident took place at Arkathi which has been recorded as an example of sacrifice of people who passionately pursued their freedom. The monastery was the headquarters of the Cretan revolutionary committee and 600 women and children from the nearby villages, together with 300 fighters, had taken refuge inside it. The siege of the monastery by 15,000 Turkish soldiers and heavy military equipment started on 8 November 1866. The walls began to break and when the Turks had started bursting into the yard massively, the heroic hand of a Cretan revolutionary put fire in the powder magazine. The solid building exploded. The monastery of Arkathi became a holocaust. Hundreds of Cretans and Turks alike were buried under masses of stones, wood and soil. That incident is regarded as one of the most important ones in modern history of Crete. Arkathi has recently been declared a European monument of freedom...

A systematic attempt has lately been made to restore the monument. Today it is resided by two monks.



## To the sacred places of Amari

**T**he province of Amari is one of the most beautiful on Crete, with villages which have preserved their traditional character and features that bring in mind the past of the island (sculptured lintels, traditional houses and wonderful churches). It is not a long distance from Rethymnon, therefore you can plan a one-day trip there. You can also continue either towards the nearby province of Aghios Vasilios (there is a road from Gerakari to Spili) or eastwards past the village of Apothoulou to the plain of Messara. We recommend a visit to Amari either in Spring (April), when the cherry trees are in blossom and the scenery is amazingly beautiful, or late May - early June, when they are in full bearing. Amari, though, is beautiful in any time of the year.

None of the monasteries in the region of Amari are active today. A contact with the local priests should precede the visit to the churches, because they remain locked.

The old, today deserted monastery of Aghios Antonios at Veni, built on the mountainside, is open to the visitors. The cavernous church is very impressive and there is holy water dripping inside.

The church of Aghios Ioannis Photis, close to Gerakari, is also unlocked and is visited by a great number of people, due to its interesting wall paintings.

### THE MONASTERY OF ASOMATOS

The province of Amari is one of the most vegetant provinces of Crete, but also one of the richest in Christian monuments. There are beautiful frescoed churches, as well as monasteries which are inactive today, nevertheless they remain silent witnesses of a great tradition. The now deserted monastery of Asomatos was the largest monastery in the region, at least during the past few centuries. It is 35 kms distant from Rethymnon. Before getting to it, however, it is worth paying a visit to the also deserted monastery of Aghios Antonios at the village of Veni.

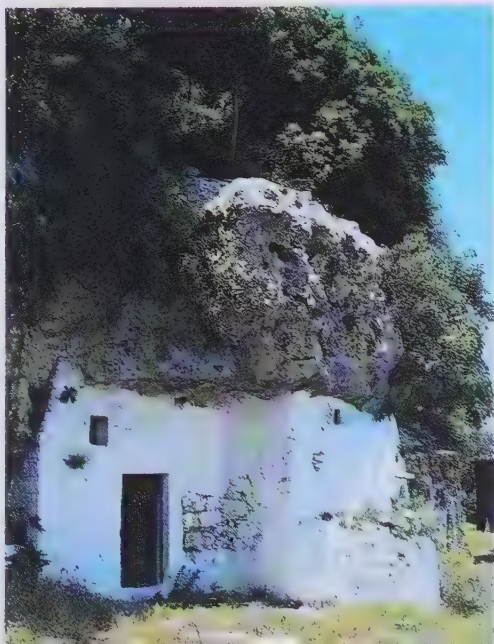
### MONASTERY OF AGHIOS ANTONIOS AT VENI

It lies close to the village of Pantanassa, at a high altitude. A rough earth-road leads to it. It was an old monastery and in all probability it was built on the site of an ancient temple. The large cavernous church of Saint Antonios is a center of worship in the surrounding area. The cave is divided into two large sections. The external (eastern) part is occupied by the church and in the internal there is the holy water, which has been dripping for thousands of years from the stalactites and the stone roof of the cave. Large numbers of worshippers

247. Arkathi. Saint Paul from the old sanctuary doors of the monastery.

248. St John the Forerunner, icon of the 16th century. Museum of Arkathi.

249. The cavernous church of St Antonios at the village of Veni.





250. Silver-bound Gospel book of the Asomaton Monastery. Today it is kept in the Historical Museum of Crete.

251, 252. Inscriptions from the Asomaton Monastery.

253. Saint Anna's church.



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reach the cave from long distances to get this holy water. The skulls of the monks who had lived in that small monastery are in a dark corner of the cave.

The buildings are adjusted to the geographical structure of the land. Only a few of the old cells and the rooms of common use have survived. The monastery of Aghios Antonios had belonged to the big monastery of Arkathi since the Venetian period.

### THE MONASTERY OF ASOMATOS

It is a large fortress-like monastery. Very few things, witnesses of its older history, exist today. One can see a part of the old gate, although it has been altered. The monastery had been in existence since the 2<sup>nd</sup> Byzantine period (961-1204), because it is referred to in a document of

the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is believed that it was from there that the 1272 revolution against the Venetians burst out. The local tradition maintains that the monastery was founded by a Byzantine noblewoman. She was from Chandax (present-day Heraklion) and was in search of an appropriate place in the mountains of Amari to live in seclusion. So she did, but soon enough she got weary of the wild desolation. A monk realized that her noble soul was seeking a different place, a peaceful place with water, high trees and birds that would alleviate her loneliness and would bring her even closer to God. Thus, he indicated her the valley of Asomatos. It was there that she decided to build a convent.

The monastery enjoyed great prosperity in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It had already started





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acquiring property through donations and tributes by the Christians. Throughout the duration of the Turkish occupation it was the spiritual and social center in the province of Amari. A number of sacerdotal vestments, sacred vessels and books of the monastery are kept in the Historical Museum in Heraklion.

Its situation close to villages inhabited by islamized Cretans had caused it many problems. It was often plundered and destroyed. The gravest damage, though, was caused by the terrible earthquake which hit Crete in 1810. The fortified construction collapsed! The abbot's quarters were burnt down in 1818 and in 1821 it faced the danger of being completely destroyed because of the big Greek revolution. The monks dispersed in different places and only after the end of the

revolution did they return.

After 1930 the monastery was converted into a school of Agriculture. Its lands were used for the training of the farmers of the district. Today that activity has flagged.

### AGHIA PARASKEVI

It is a small Byzantine monument very close to the monastery of Asomatos, only one kilometer distant from it (to the west). It is a cruciform church with a dome and a unique mural on the arched recess of the southern wall, right above George Chortatzis' grave, who was an offspring of an outstanding Byzantine clan of Crete. The wall painting depicts Christ blessing two persons who are in a beseeching posture. On the same mural one can see (although with difficulty,





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owing to the corruption) a farewell scene. A man on horseback wearing a military uniform is bidding farewell to a woman and some other persons. George Chortatzis' name is mentioned in an inscription on the wall painting which reads: "*Supplication of the servant of God George Chortatzis and his wife*". Certain researchers interpret the wall painting as the representation of the scene when, the 13<sup>th</sup> century chieftain Chortatzis was saying goodbye to his wife before riding off on a campaign against the Venetians. Aghia Paraskevi's church had belonged to the monastery of Asomatos.

### AGHIA ANNA

A short earth-road leads from the monastery of Asomatos to the beautiful church of Saint Anna. The landscape is fascinating and the view over the olive-groves of the province of Amari is spectacular. It is the oldest frescoed church on Crete. An epitaphic inscription of the early Christian times survives which reads as follows:

AKATAS AKATAS' SON AGED 19.

### MONASTERY OF KERA PANAGHIA

It is situated between the villages of Nefs Amari and Meronas, in a rural area among vast olive groves. The visitor has to inquire at Nefs Amari about the way to it. It is an old monastery, deserted today. The church with its peculiar architectural style constitutes an example of aisleless church which was later extended with successive buildings. The ornamented relief door shows the significance of the monument. There is not sufficient evidence today revealing its history, except for a few Venetian docu-



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254. Saint Anna's church.

255. The beautiful cruciform church of Saint Paraskevi. It is sited close to the Asomatos Monastery.

256. Mural painting from the Monastery of St George Xiphiphoros at the village of Apothoulou, Amari.

257. The Monastery of Kaloithena at the village of Ano Meros, Amari. The church collapsed in 1992.











ments referring to affairs of the monastery and the monks who resided there. It was one of the small Cretan monasteries which were occupied by a restricted number of monks (two or three) during the late years of the Venetian rule.

### PANAGHIA AT MERONAS

The beautiful cavernous church of the Virgin at the village of Meronas was to all appearances the main church of an old monastery which functioned in the Byzantine period and later, in the course of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Florentine Monk Christopher Buondelmondi, who visited Crete in 1415, recorded that he had met monks at Meronas. The abbot of the monastery was a fervent Orthodox Christian who spoke passionately about the much desired reunion of Crete with Byzantium. As it appears from the description, the abbot and the other members of the community resided at the village and, most probably, at the church of the Virgin.

The frescoes of the church date from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century and represent a typical trend of the Byzantine art which developed in Crete at that time and had been influenced directly by the art of Constantinople. The church is a triple-aisled vaulted basilica with a beautiful carved door-frame bearing the coat-of-arms of the great Byzantine Kallergis family.

### AGHIOS IOANNIS PHOTIS

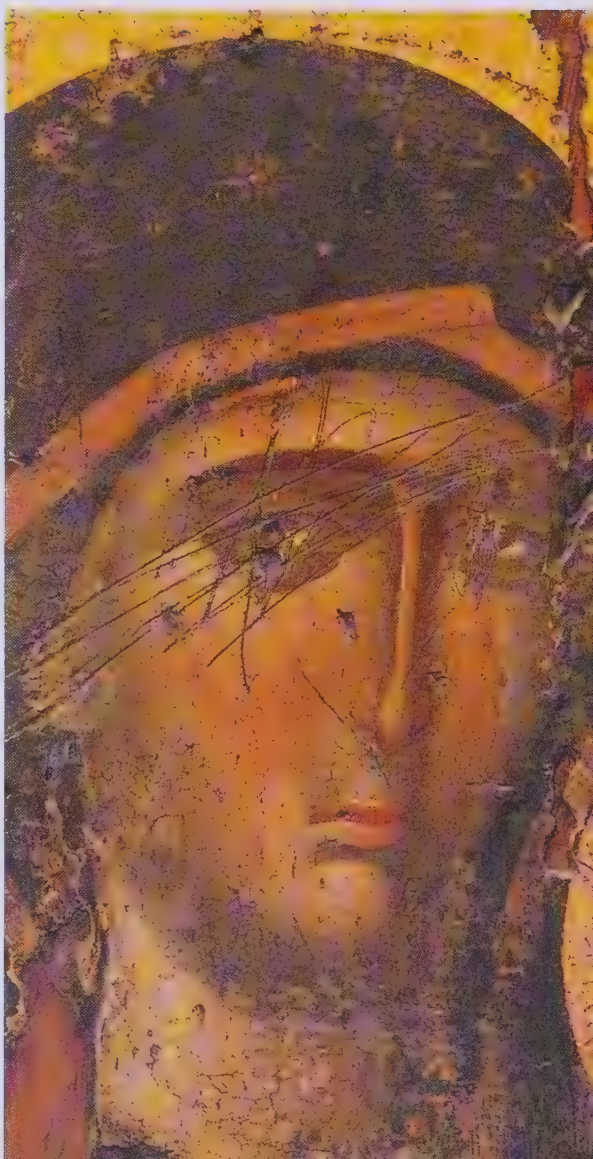
It is another beautiful frescoed Byzantine church in the province of Amari. It lies close to the village of Gerakari, just off the main motorway. One comes upon it shortly before arriving at the village. It was erected in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is in a fairly good condition today, owing to the repair works carried out by the archaeological service. It is a vaulted church with a dome which symbolized heaven in Byzantine architecture. Tradition states that monks resided there and that it was the main church of an old monastery. It is also reported that the ruins to be seen near the church are the ruins of their living quarters. According to the same tradition, the church was destroyed in 1646, when the Turks captured the area and butchered the monks.

The surviving wall paintings date from the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

258. The beautiful lithoglyph on the door-frame of Kera Panaghia, Amari.

259. The church of Saint John Photis at the village of Gerakari.

260. Icon of Theotokos. Church of the Virgin, Meronas (14<sup>th</sup> century).





## MONASTERY OF KALOITHENA

It is a small monastery, deserted since 1821. The church, which looked like the church of Saint John the Theologian (Photis) at Gerakari, was almost entirely destroyed in 1993 and with it the remains of the fine wall decoration were lost. The dome and the roof fell down and only the walls are still standing. The landscape is wonderful. The monastery lies at an elevation of the ground near the village of Ano Meros in the province of Amari, enjoying a superlative view of Mount Psiloreitis and the vast olive groves of the Amari valley. The huge plane-trees make the climate cool during the Summer. Copious water flows from the site of the monastery, which is used to meet the needs of the inhabitants of Ano Meros.

Even today, that the ruins constitute a depressive scene, one can approach the legend and the tradition and be overwhelmed by the awe-inspiring sacred past of the place. A small bas-relief in the form of a human head is to be seen on the eastern wall of the church. It is said to be the model of a woman from the nearby village of Phourphouras, who used to see a flame at the site of the monastery every night. The place was searched and the icon of the Virgin was found. Owing to that fact the monastery was built. The woman's sculpted head was walled there in such a manner that her eyes constantly look towards her village, Phourphouras.

261. *Aghios Ioannis Photis, Gerakari.*

262. *Theothosios. An anchorite living on the south coast of Rethymnon.*











## *To the monasteries of Prevelis and Sfakia*

**P**revelis monastery is one of the biggest and richest on Crete. It was deserted a few years ago and was revived later thanks to the Metropolitan of Lambi and Sfakia. Even in the time of its desolation, however, it received great numbers of visitors and worshippers. It lies at an impressive, peaceful site with a superlative view to the endless Libyan sea. Close to the monastery, down at the beach, there is a unique lake and an impressive palm-tree forest (there is a path there from the beach of Amouthi). Before arriving at the monastery, make a stop and enjoy the magnificent view to the Lake of Prevelis.

In order to get at this place, take the road Rethymnon - Aghios Vasilios. It is the same road which passes through the ravine of Kotsiphos and leads to Sfakia. On the way to Sfakia, pull off to visit Frangocastellon, the beautiful fortress built by the Venetians near the beach. Across the road, under the plentiful foliage of a carob tree, stands Saint Nikitas' church, where a great religious feast is held on 15<sup>th</sup> September. Have a look at the beautiful mosaic floor outside the church. It belongs to an older church, an early Christian basilica which had existed at the site.

Churches (this is also the case with the church of Thymniani) are not always open and the visitor should be in touch with the appropriate person first. We recommend a visit to the impressive church of Saint Paul, which has been beaten by the waves of the Libyan Sea for a thousand years. (For details, see p. 186).

### **MONASTERY OF PREVELIS**

The journey to the south of Crete and the Monastery of Prevelis offers unique moments of excitement to the visitor, who finds himself within an environment completely different and special, stamped with memories from old hermitages. Before arriving at the monastery one could stop at the village of Lambini (close to Spili, 27 kms distant from Rethymnon) and visit the Byzantine church of the Virgin, with the wonderful dome and preserved sections of the wall decoration.

The fork to the monastery of Prevelis starts at the 22<sup>nd</sup> km of the road Rethymnon-Spili. The route is unique, as before long it passes through the Kourtaliotiko ravine, and one feels the grandeur of the Cretan nature. Before getting out of the ravine one can see the steps leading to the church of Saint Nikolaos, a local Saint. If you are good at ascending and descending scores of steps, you should not miss the visit to that church.

After the exit from the ravine, you breathe the air of the Libyan Sea. At the village of Asomatos turn left and continue to the monastery of Prevelis. On the way you can enjoy the nature, the vegetation but also the works of the monks and hermits in the area. From time to time you can see humble chapels or ruins from monasteries and their dependencies. A river (named Big River) flows into the south sea, next to an exotic palm-tree forest. It can be met 500 meters before the first building complex of Prevelis. The road leading to the monastery has passed over it and the bridge now seen was constructed at the expense of the monastery in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Monastic life in the area has its deeper roots in hermitism and monasticism which developed in the south coast of central Crete. Vestiges of the old hermitages are now distinctly visible close to the Back (Piso) Monastery, near the church of Saint Onouphrios and the church of Saint Savvas which stands on the beautiful coast with the palm-trees.

Let's, however, continue our journey. Two roads set out from the bridge of the Big River. One leads to the monastery and the other turns







to the left, passes by the bridge and leads to the picturesque beach of Ammouthis, from where one can walk to the mouth of the river, the palm-tree forest and Saint Savvas' church. The other road (to the right) leads to the two big monastic complexes. The first monastery one comes upon, 200 meters distant from the bridge of the Big River, is entirely desolate and ruined. It was named "Lower (Kato) Monastery" in order to be distinguished from the other, the central one, which is named "Back Monastery" and lies about 2 kms away. In the course of the past few centuries the cultivators of the monasterial land and the supervising monks resided in the now deserted buildings of the first monastery to come across. The storerooms for the storage of the agricultural products and the supplies were also at the same place. The monastery of Prevelis consisted of two monastic complexes, because two big monasteries and several smaller ones had existed at that place since the Venetian times which were joined into the big Prevelis Monastery. One of those monasteries was the, once, big monastery of Saint George at Malathres (near the banks of the Big River), from which only the ruins of the enormous church and many parts of the wall decoration survive today. This monastery can be reached through the village of Mournes (near Spili), though we suggest that you should not visit it without the company of a resident of the district, who obviously knows the place and can guide you.

The Lower Monastery is consecrated to Saint John the Baptist. The church and a big part of the building are still standing, yet the state of the monument is distressing. Long after its abandonment, various people, mainly foreigners, settled there arbitrarily, who didn't respect the sacred place. You can leave the car on the road and endeavour an acquaintance with the ruins. The first impression comes from the fallen roofs and the peculiar chimneys, a small "forest" of chimneys which no longer give off smoke during the cold winter nights. A walk around the ruins is equivalent to a journey in the past. The basic features of the popular Cretan architecture are distinct. The place, however, is dominated by the ruins...

The trip to the Back Monastery is equally interesting, as one can see churches and old



264. Monastery of Prevelis. The sanctuary doors of the Back (Piso) Monastery.

265. Saint John. Icon from the elaborate icon-stand.

monasteries either on the way or on the hills across the way. Among the things you can see is the mouth of the Big River, which looks like an exotic place. When you get to the Back Monastery you will be impressed by the natural landscape as well as by the harmony of the monastic complex. You may bring the English mariner Spratt in mind who wrote that the paradise of Crete is here, a retreat for anyone who would like to get rid of the responsibilities and cares of life! The deep blue





Libyan Sea spreads out before one's eyes and a small or large ship may be seen sailing on it. The beauty of the sea becomes even more exotic because of the altitudinal difference and the deep green vegetation.

Before the monastery there is a small model church. It is the ossuary. The graveyard of the monastery is also at this place. The monastic establishment is built on a sloping ground. In order to make space for its construction the solution of the different levels was invented. The stables and the store-rooms were built on the lower level. The animals were led straight there and it was not necessary to cross the main yard, where the church, the abbot's and the monks' quarters were. The fountain of the monastery survives at the lower yard, bearing the commonplace Byzantine inscription:

**ΝΙΨΟΝΑΝΟΜΗΜΑΤΑ  
ΜΗΜΟΝΑΝΟΨΙΝ**

(Cleanse your sins, not only your face).

The inscription is palindromic, that is to say, it is readable either from left to right or from right to left. The old vaulted building to the west of the fountain has been transformed into a museum today. One can see fine Post-Byzantine icons there, as well as sacerdotal vestments, sacred vessels, old books and numerous votive offerings (such as traditional Cretan jewellery, etc.).

The church is not too old. It was built in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An old Byzantine church had stood on its site, which was knocked down by the ignorant monks of the time to be replaced by a new one. The decision for its demolition was made because the Turkish government did not allow its repair and the monks were determined to find a definite solution. They found the solution during the Egyptian rule (1830-1840) when the erection of churches was not forbidden. The entry to the church reminds one of the Byzantine grandeur and mystagogy. The iconostasis is of exceptional beauty, and so is



266. Kato Monastery. The chimneys do not give off smoke any longer...

267. The icon-stand of the Monastery of Prevelis.

268. The King of the Kings. 1750, Prevelis Monastery.









269. Prevelis Monastery. Section of the wooden carved iconostasis.

270. The Back (Piso) Monastery.

271. Aghios Savvas at the lake of Prevelis. One of the Post-Byzantine monuments of the area. The visitor can also admire some frescoed churches, such as Aghios Georghios at Xylomacheri and Aghia Photini.

the woodcarved icon-stand and the pulpit. The icons on the iconostasis are wonderful. They are Post-Byzantine icons revealing the painting trend created in Crete several decades, or even a whole century, after the capture of the island by the Turks. Among the relics of the monastery is the wonder-working cross of the monastery of Prevelis. The monastery tradition holds that it was stolen twice.

Once by the Turks and once by the Nazis. Neither of these attempts was successful, though! It is said that the cross had prevented the aircraft carrying it from taking off!

The monastery is not built in the form of a fortress. I believe that it is due to the rapid development of the monastery during the period of the Turkish rule. After the conquest of Crete by the Turks there was no longer the need for fortification (as the danger of the pirates had been over).

The now known history of the monastery of Prevelis commences shortly after the capture of Crete. There is scanty historical evidence about the years prior to the fall of the island. For example, we know that the Lower Mona-



stery was named the Monastery of the Big River, but we don't have any information about its form, or its possible relation to the Back Monastery. The present name of "Prevelis" must have been established after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, owing to a restorer of the monastery whose family name was Prevelis. In a document of 1577 there is mention of the place-name "Saint John the Theologian" in the area. It evidently refers to the monastery of Prevelis, and this is its oldest known mention. We still know from the frescoed churches that the religious monuments of the region were painted during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Because of the union of the monasteries of the area, most probably in the early years of the Turkish occupation, and the donations that followed, the monastery of Prevelis became an economic giant and influenced the life nearly in the whole prefecture of Rethymnon. The names of most of the abbots of that period are known today, as they were saved together with a part of the valuable archives of the monastery. Its contribution to the local society is likewise known. The maintenance of a school at the monastery conveyed the seeds of education. The monastery offered bread and money to the poor subjugated Cretans and supported the great liberating struggle of Crete. Before the uprising of 1821, the monastery was ruled by the abbot Melchisethk Tsoutheros, a brilliant personality of modern Cretan history. It was him who armed and organized the first revolutionary army. Long before the revolution, he had seen to collect weapons, food and munitions which were to be used during the struggle. The Turks had been informed or, at least, they had suspected his role and, shortly before the outbreak of the revolution, in May 1821, they attacked the Lower Monastery and destroyed it. They would have slaughtered the monks, hadn't Melchisethk effected a clever plan: he welcomed them, offered them hospitality and good wine. When they got asleep, tired and drunk, the monks fled leaving their monastery without a community! Melchisethk provided them with arms and amunitions and thus the action of the first revolutionary group of Crete started. That uprising was put down in blood, Crete didn't become part of the newly-established Greek State and the Turks seized the property of the monastery. Fortunately, the



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more liberal (for political reasons) Egyptian rule followed (1830-1840) and the monastery gained back the lands seized by the Turks. The monastery offered all its valuables in support of the struggle for liberation. The silver and the sacred vessels were sold to purchase cannons and weapons!

The monastery took an active part in the great Cretan 1866 uprising. During the period 1867-1869 the area became the shelter of the refugees who abandoned their villages. The Greek ships put in at the shore of Prevelis, transported guns and munitions for the struggle and took the women and children to the liberated Greek mainland. In 1867 hundreds of women and children were staying on the beach for many days waiting to embark on





ships. The monks provided those civilians with food and at the same time supported the revolutionaries and volunteers who had come from the Greek mainland to fight.

The monastery played a similar role in the period 1941-1945. Hundreds of soldiers of the allied-antinazi forces were offered hospitality by the monks until they embarked on ships for Egypt. That period was stamped by the contribution of the Abbot Agathangelos Lagouvarthos. It was him who organized the monastery to play an important patriotic role.

The decay of the monastery started in 1960. Today it is hardly functioning occupied by only one monk.

### MONASTERIES IN THE PROVINCE OF SFAKIA

From the monastery of Prevelis one can easily visit the monasteries of the province of Sfakia, following the southern coastal road. This road is not the main arterial road leading to Sfakia. The visitor can also follow the road Chania-Rethymnon and at the village of Vrises turn to the left. We suggest the southern route, because it is more convenient for the visitor wishing to see the Byzantine and Post-Byzantine monuments, and because he can combine this visit with the trip to other monuments in the southern part of the prefecture of Rethymnon.

### MONASTERY OF AGHIOS CHARALAMBOS AT FRANGOCASTELLON

The first monastery one can visit lies off the road, shortly before the beautiful Venetian castle of Frangocastellon. The monastery is visible from the road, hence the visitor can easily find it. It is the now deserted monastery of Saint Charalambos, which serves as the church of the graveyard. It is an old Christian monument. An early-Christian basilica had stood on the site of the monastery. A few architectural parts from that basilica were preserved and were walled on the facade of the present church. The older history of the monastery is unknown. It's, however, known that it was active in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nun Magdalini, residing there at the time, buried the corpse of the fighter Ntalianis, a brave Greek man who had come from Hepirus to take part in the fight. The Turks bombarded Ntalianis and his men inside Frangocastellon and butchered them all. It is said that the souls of the dead fighters remained there, and every year during the last ten days of May the souls wander on the place where they had lost their lives. Their shadows appear on horseback at dawn, together with the dew, ride towards the castle and disappear into the sea. The phenomenon has been the subject of research by many scientists and different explanations have been given.

272. *Saint Onouphrios. From the homonymous church, which belongs to the Monastery of Prevelis.*

273. *Monastery of Aghios Charalambos at Frangocastellon.*







One should take the chance to visit the Venetian castle, Frangocastellon, and admire a defensive construction of the 14th century. Its construction started after 1371 by decision of the Venetian Senate. Its role was defensive but at the same time it provided protection from the pirate raids. Just opposite the castle (to the north) there is the small church of **Aghios Nikitas**. An early Christian basilica had once been on this site and its traces are visible. A church consecrated to Saint Nikitas has existed in the area since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is most likely that an old Byzantine monastery had functioned there, which was later ceded to the monastery of Saint John the Theologian of Patmos. In older times Saint Nikitas' feast was one of the greatest on Crete. One could meet armed dancers there, as well as young people participating in archery, race and other events. An effort for the resuscitation of the old custom, on 15 September, is being made.

### AGHIA ZONI

On the way from Frangocastellon to Sfakia there are several small villages. It's worth pulling off at the village of Vouvas and visit the cavernous church of Aghia Zoni. A few old cells are to be seen next to it. Nuns used to reside there during the past centuries. Today it is the cathedral of the village.

### THYMIANI

Close to the village of Komitathes lies the most important monastery of the area, the monastery of Thymiani. It is a sacred monu-





274. Thymiani. The belfry.

275. The church of Thymiani.

276. The beautiful church of Astrateghos. Photo by Ch. Stephanakis.

ment and a revered monastery for all Cretans. Although very few things are known about its older history, still it is known that it has contributed greatly to the recent history of Crete. The chieftains of Crete gathered at this place in May 1821 and it was then that the decision about the great revolution was made. The monk blessed the weapons, they vowed to shed their blood for the liberation of Crete and the big uprising broke out a few days later. In September of the same year the Turks burnt it down and destroyed its sacred vessels, sacerdotal vestments and icons.

Today only the church has survived with decorative elements and the inscriptions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Farther down the monastery, near the coast, is the cavernous church of Saint Antony, one of the old hermitages of the region.

## CHURCHES AT SFAKIA

Besides the ruins of the monasteries, some remarkable Byzantine churches have survived in the area of Sfakia. You can visit two of them, Saint George at the village of Komi-tathes, on the eastern part of the province, and Astratighos at the village of Arathena, on the mountainous area of Anopolis.

On the western wall of **Aghios Georghios'** church one can see the founder's inscription with the names of the Skorthilis family members, Kera Kali, monk Gerasimos Phourogiorghis and others. The frescoes are credited to Ioannis Pagomenos and are the oldest painted by him in western Crete. They date from 1314.

**Astratighos'** church at Arathena is consecrated to Michael the Archangel and is situated at the western side of an imposing and wild ravine. Until a few years ago it was difficult to reach Arathena. The visitor had to go down the ravine and then go up from the opposite side. The walk was difficult and



tiring. Today, thanks to an iron bridge adjusted across the ravine in 1986, Arathena can be reached easily. The church makes an impression situated among the ruined houses of the, once, lively and active settlement. It is a church with a dome and an extension built at its west side in later years. Its frescoes date from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The church has been a significant religious center for the residents of the province. The suspects of cattle-stealing swore there in older years and nobody dared to lie before the icon of Michael the Archangel.

### AGHIOS PAVLOS' CHURCH

The most impressive (and oldest) Byzantine monument of the area lies on the western part of the province of Sfakia, near the settlement of Aghia Roumeli. It is Saint Paul's church, a building of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The visit to the site of the church takes much time, yet it is very interesting. The church is approachable either from the mountain or from the sea. There is not a motor road to the church, in fact there is not one to any seaside area on the western part of Sfakia. The first route requires a long walk but it is quoted because many visitors might be interested in combining the visit to Saint Paul's church with a trip through the gorge of Samaria. The gorge is 18 kms long and it takes 5 to 7 hours to walk through it. The church is to the east of the exit of the gorge. The second route is less tiring, equally interesting, though. The visitor can sail by boat from the town of Sfakia to Aghia Roumeli and then walk eastwards to Saint Paul's for about an hour and a half. The church lies on the beach, having been lashed by the waves for up to a thousand years now! It is a nice cruciform church with a dome, while traces of the rich wall decoration are still to be seen in its interior. The Cretan Saint Ioannis the Hermit or Xenos is believed to be the founder of the church. That Saint took action in Crete after the liberation of the island by the Arab Saracens (961 A.D.). He built a lot of churches, founded monasteries and contributed to the maintainance of the Byzantine and Orthodox conscience of the native population, that was cut off from the main body of the Byzantine Empire for 130 years. Tradition holds that the Saint erected the church in commemoration of the Apostle Paul's visit to the area.



277. The Apostle Paul's church at Aghia Roumeli, Sfakia.  
278. Aghia Zoni.

## *To the monasteries of Myriokephala and Roustika*

**T**he founder of the monastery of Panaghia Antiphonitria at Myriokephala is Ioannis Xenos (Stranger) or Hermit, a significant Cretan saint, who lived in the 10th century and contributed to the cultural and religious reunion of Crete with Byzantium after 150 years of subjugation by that Arab - Saracens. The monastery lived a period of great prosperity. Today it is deserted but continues to be a great religious place of worship. In the recent years restoration works have been carried out there.

The monastery of the Prophet Helias is situated at the end of the beautiful village of Roustika, 21 kms from Rethymnon. The road to both these monasteries passes through Atsipopoulo and continues towards Roustika. Myriokephala is 37 kms from Rethymnon.

### **MONASTERY OF KYRIA ANTIPHONITRIA AT MYRIOKEPHALA**

Myriokephala is a small village on the western border of the prefecture of Rethymnon, 37 kms distant from the town of Rethymnon (fork to the left at the 22nd km of the old national road Rethymnon - Chania). At this small village a significant Byzantine monument of Crete survives: the main church of the monastery of Kyria Antiphonitria. The present condition of the church carries no conviction of its historical and archaeological value. It has been "repaired" in recent years, thus being deprived of its monumental character. The "repair" had actually started even earlier, when everything that had remained from the old monastery, cells and other buildings, were knocked down and was replaced by a modern construction. The wall paintings of the church transfer one back into the Byzantine times, as they show the effort to reconnect Crete with Constantinople, after 130 years of enslavement by the Arab Saracens. In fact, they show the attempt of certain local painters to follow the artistic patterns from which they had been entirely cut off, that is the Byzantine patterns. To be more specific, the frescoes of the inner (older) layer and the outer (newer) layer are different. The earlier paintings have bold outlines and generally, they are not characterized by the usual Byzantine expressiveness.

Both the church and the monastery were built by Saint Ioannis the Hermit or Xenos in

the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In his will the Saint himself describes the conditions under which he had founded the monastery. He had seen an old Greek building there and, as soon as he had got in, he lost his sight. He wrote that he had been blind for seven days and seven nights. During all those days he kept praying, and, on the seventh day, he heard an unknown voice urging him to look eastwards and build the church of the Virgin Antiphonitria at the site where he would see a light. This is how he started the building of the church and the monastery. He established monks and stayed there himself for some time. He had, however, to continue his course, a course characterized by the erection of new churches and monasteries which he appointed subject to the monastery of Myriokephala. That monastery was one of the most significant religious centres of Byzantine Crete throughout the 2<sup>nd</sup> Byzantine period. Saint John maintained relations with the capital of Byzantium, kept in contact with the Emperor himself and the Patriarch, and had even transferred the holy icons for the decoration of the church from Constantinople. Yet, it is not known whether it was a stavropighion-patriarchal monastery, though it is highly probable. If it had been a patriarchal monastery, it would have been seized by the Latin Patriarch of Constantinople after the conquest of Crete by the Turks. The Latin Patriarch of Constantinople followed the same policy with many other imperial monasteries on Crete. However, no evidence has been drawn concerning the









279. Monastery of Roustika. Monk Eumenios.

280. The Entry into Jerusalem. Wall painting from the Monastery of Myriokephala.



history of the monastery, no mention of it is made in documents to highlight its course during the Venetian period. It had probably fallen into decay, although it was still functioning.

It was in decline during the Turkish rule, too. It was occupied by a few monks who tried to keep the historical memory intact. The beautiful portable icon of the Virgin, now in the church, was painted in the course of the Turkish occupation (early 18<sup>th</sup> century). The painter was a monk and, most probably, a member of the community of Myriocephala. Local tradition, however, considers this icon much older. The monastery experienced periods of desolation and became a dependency of the nearby monastery of Prophet Helias at the village of Roustika. It was dissolved in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today it hasn't got a monastic community.

### MONASTERY OF PROPHET HELIAS AT ROUSTIKA

It is one of the monasteries which developed in the course of the Venetian rule in the vicinity of the nice village of Roustika. The village is 21 kms distant from Rethymnon and is situated in a densely vegetated area. It is a very religious area preserving memories of its monastic history with deserted cells, old churches and numerous local traditions. One of the old monasteries at Roustika was the convent of the **Virgin Kera**, at a distance of about 500 meters from the monastery of Prophet Helias, in the southeastern part of the village. During the last few centuries it belonged to the monastery of Prophet Helias and was resided by nuns. It was actually founded for this reason, because nuns were not allowed to live together with monks. Vestiges of the living quarters and a section of the surrounding wall with a row of loopholes are extant next to the church of the Virgin Kera.

Close to the monastery of Prophitis Helias, northwest to the village and behind the last houses lie the ruins of the old monastery of **Aghios Ioannis the Theologian Myrothis**. It had been an independent monastery, which later on became subject to the monastery of the Prophet Helias, under unknown circumstances. Its church is ruined. Only the side walls are still standing, while the roof fell



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down inside the church many centuries ago. A big part of the church (it is a simple-aisled church) is covered by ivy. The remains of the living quarters indicate that the monastery occupied quite a large area.

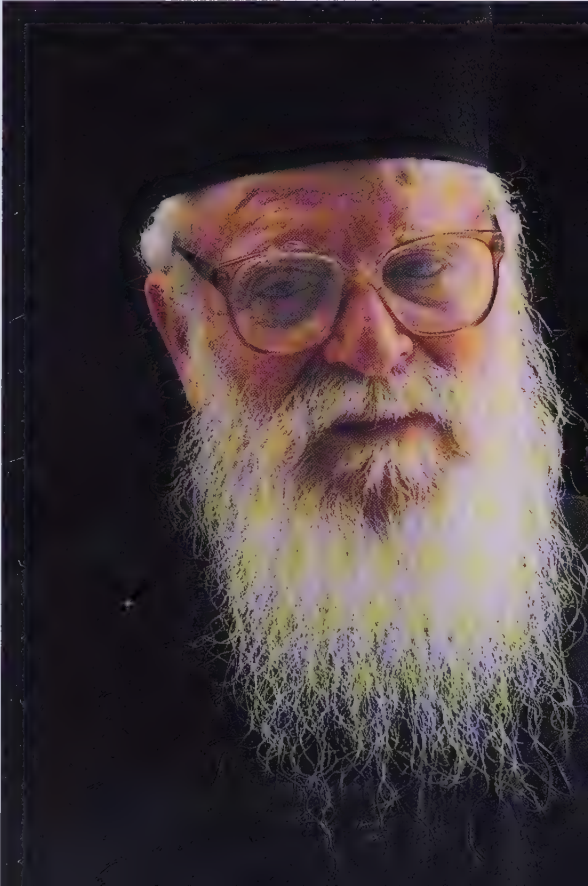
The monastery of Prophet Helias is the only monastery in the wider area which has been preserved up to our days. It is built in the form of a fortress and the main entrance is at the northern side of the building complex. On the lintel one can read the founder's inscription bearing the name of the Abbot Mitrophanis Vlastos and the date 1641. The monastery was evidently possession of the great Vlastos family, which rendered many abbots to the monastery. The date 1641 indicates that the building works hadn't been completed before the Turkish assault against Crete, in 1646. The original architect employed the traditional monasterial architecture of the Orthodox Church. It is a fortress-like monastery, the living quarters occupying the southern side as well as part of the eastern side. The large refectory (a rectangular building for common luncheons) is at the western side, near the abbot's lodgings.

Many significant works had remained unfinished at the monastery when the Turks captured Crete in 1646. The effort to complete those works in 1667 caused the intervention of the Turkish authorities, but the Ecclesiastical Judge of Rethymnon (an Ottoman) gave a decision in favour of the monastery. The works which were in progress then included the building of the stable and the storerooms.

An informal school was operated there during the Turkish rule, but the monastery suffered gravely during that period. In 1821 the monks sold everything of value to purchase weapons and munitions for the revolutionaries.

After the end of the revolution the monastic life was re-organized. It was then that most of the icons on the iconostasis were painted. Today it is resided by three monks.

- 281. Monastery of Myriokephala. Wall painting.
- 282. Stone table in the yard of the Monastery of Prophet Helias, Roustika.
- 283. Monastery of Prophet Helias. Photo of the fine belfry.
- 284. Monastery of Roustika. The abbot.





## To the monasteries of Mylopotamon

**T**he monasteries of Mylopotamon, to the east of Rethymnon, very close to the holy mountain of Ida, offer the chance of a fantastic trip. Take the old national road Rethymnon - Heraklion and start with the monastery of Diskouri, near Axos, a village with significant antiquities and frescoed churches (46 kms distant from Rethymnon). The monastery of Chalepa is farther up the little village of Agrithia. If you have a 4WD car you can go there through Axos, a very beautiful route actually. The visit to the now deserted monastery of Vosakos is not very easy, in fact it is possible only by a 4WD car. The route is through the village of Thoxaro and continues to the north. The monastery of Aghios Ioannis at Bali is approachable from the new national road. It is situated higher up the homonymous coastal settlement of Bali, at a distance of only 1 km from the national road. Access to the national road is possible from Perama, the capital of the province of Mylopotamon.

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### AGHIOS IOANNIS AT BALI

The monastery of Aghios Ioannis Bali (or Attali as named in former years) is situated in an area full of vestiges and remains of old hermitages, on a mountainside higher up the coastal settlement of Bali. Although the monastery was active in the Venetian period, still the date of its founding is unknown. The site of the monastery is impressive. It occupies an area with a view to the Cretan sea, yet it is not easily visible from the sea. Today's visitor can reach the monastery without difficulty, by following the deviation (1 km) from the highway. In older years, however, the access was not from the coast but from the interior of the island, so the main entrance was at a different place, at the western side of the establishment, in front of a huge rock. It is in the usual style of the monasterial pylons (vaulted with built benches). After having passed through the gate the visitor faced the stable, where he could leave his horse. The architecture of the monastery presents certain peculiarities owing to the sloping ground and the special conditions of the time which necessitated its fortification. To begin with, the main church is not situated at the center of the yard, as it is customary in the monasterial architecture of the Orthodox East, but at a separate site and on a different level, at the northern side of the building complex. It was the best possible solution abiding by the building techniques of the time. Of special importance is the construction of the enclosed internal yard, where are the entrances to the

285. View of the Monastery of Attali (Bali).  
286. The southern side of the main church.









cells. The yard is roofed over by successive stone arches which create a unique monasterial environment. The reasoning of the construction was to make small flat areas on the mountainside and to build the monastery on different levels.

The history of the monastery starts in the period of the Venetian rule. The monks chose a place rich in monastic and ascetic memories to establish an organized monastery. There were hermitages and small monasteries on the slopes around and also on the coast. It is not accidental that the hill opposite the monastery is named Pachoumis' Hill (Pachoumios is a monk's name) and the next is named Hill of Aghia Ypakoe (Submission). Epigraphic and other evidence proves that the present-day monastery was built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, shortly before the invasion of the Turks. Yet, it is not known whether the monastery was built at a site chosen by the monks or at the site of the old monastery.

A few years after the completion of the building works the Turks attacked Crete. The bay of Bali, very close to the monastery, was used for military purposes and the monastery of Aghios Ioannis Bali found itself in the whirlpool of the great fight. What actually happened and what damage it suffered is not known. The tradition on the island of Siphnos till the 19<sup>th</sup> century reported that the monks who fled away from Crete had taken the icon of the Virgin of Bali with them, and it is in that small Aegean island even today.

Evidence surviving on inscriptions and documents reveals that the monastery was active throughout the course of the Turkish rule. The monks took part in the 1821 revolution and the monastery was burnt down. The revolutionary tradition continued in 1866, during the great Cretan revolt, in which the later Abbot of Bali, Gerasimos Pikrakis, distinguished himself. Gerasimos had sailed to the island of Syros by a small ship to get munitions for the Cretan revolutionaries. The Turks captivated the ship, slaughtered the captain and sailed towards Southa. Brave Gerasimos managed to escape by falling into the sea and swimming to the shore.

After 1840 the monastery started to fall into decay until later, in the 1960's, it was entirely deserted. Its reconstruction and restoration started in 1982.



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287. Monastery of Attali. Part of the buildings.

288. Monastery of Attali. The small oblong yard.

289. Window in the shape of the number "8" at the Monastery of Attali.

## MONASTERY OF VOSAKOS

The route to the monastery of Stavromenos at Vosakos is through the village of Thoxaro in Mylopotamon. From there a rural rough road leads to the monastery, about 8 kms from the village. We suggest that you should not decide this trip if you don't have a 4WD car. The visit to Vosakos offers rare excitement. Very few visitors reach this place,





hence the nature is pure. During one of our visits to the monastery we met a very affectionate mother at the side of the road “teaching” her children how to cope with the difficulties of life. It was a partridge with her young offsprings. Her song-call was a very pleasant surprise for us that April afternoon. On the way you will meet a small picturesque plateau with a few huge pine-trees in the middle, although it is not the only plateau on the way. Nature has endowed this beautiful mountain area with much beauty, profuse vegetation and many picturesque corners which inspire feelings of serenity. The now deserted monastery of Christ Crucified or Vosakos, as named by the native people, is built on the last

small plateau, which is next to the others.

The word Vosakos is derived directly from the doric dialect of the ancient Greek language and means an ox-shed.

Is is a fortress-like monastery, surrounded by walls, according to the traditional monasterial architecture. The entrance is at the eastern side. Before passing through the vaulted passage one can see the stone built mangers outside the monastery. The people arriving at Vosakos bound their horses to them.

The monastery is rectangular in shape and has been adjusted to the particularity of the ground. The eastern side is much smaller than the other three and the northern is adjusted to



the mountainside. The northern sides of the living quarters of the north wing are dug in the ground, that is, they are underground, the southern sides of the same cells are on ground level, whereas their facades are on the top level of the central yard. On passing through the main entrance, you can see the built benches where the visitors could sit, thus being protected by the rain or the sun. After having passed through the vaulted passage with the benches, you face the sanctuary of the church. The entrance is at its western side and above the door there is an inscription on dark marble recording that the church was first built in 1195, but it was demolished twice and was rebuilt. The present church is a building

of the late decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Before entering the church, have a look at the fountain. It is just next to you, at the northern side of the yard. Today it is dry. Its inscription informs the visitor that it was built in 1673.

The cells, as well as the other buildings, are completely desolate. The lack of maintenance was the reason of their destruction.

The history of the monastery, from the time

290. View of the Monastery of Vosakos.

291. Vosakos. The main entrance.





292. Monastery of Vosakos. Bas relief from the main entrance dated 1669.

293. General view of the Monastery of Chalepa.

of its founding till our days, is not known. We only know that it was active during the Venetian rule and that a lot of building or repairing works were performed after the seizure of the area by the Turkish army. The inscriptions which have survived on the buildings date from that period, such as the characteristic inscription on the main entrance, which bears a fine relief cross and the date AXΞΘ (1669). In 1676 a patriarchal bull was issued by which the monastery of Vosakos was made Stavropighion (directly subject to the Patriarchate and protected by it). The 1821 revolution found the monastery in a developing course. It was one of the greatest

religious centers of the region and the water of its spring was believed to be blessed and therapeutic. At the same time the monks occupied themselves with specific activities, such as apiculture (the monastery had even a special workshop for the processing of honey) and cattle-raising. Unfortunately, during the revolution the monastery was burnt down and 17 out of the 20 monks of the community were slaughtered.

It took much time and labour to reconstruct and re-establish it. Its far-off situation on an uninhabited plateau made it a significant center of national action. The refugees and the revolted against the Turks found shelter in its cells and its national contribution was extended to the active participation of the monastic community in the 1866 revolt.

After the Second World War it started to decline. In the early 50's only three old monks resided there. The monastery continued to possess a lot of cattle as well as many beehives. During those final years of the monastery's functioning a remarkable event took place there, a phenomenon of complete reconciliation between man and nature. The age-old monks were not able to raise the cattle. Hence, they had let them free on the nearby mountain slopes. Every evening a monk went out of the western yard, called the animals and they obeyed; they descended the slopes of the surrounding mountains within a few minutes and got into the sheepfold to be milked. Those remembering the incident recount it with admiration, because among the other animals there were some goats, almost wild, which nobody could approach under normal circumstances.

The monastery has been deserted since 1955. The buildings, which were then standing in an excellent condition, have been damaged by time and most of them are now lying in ruins.

### MONASTERY OF CHALEPA

It is one of the monasteries situated on the slopes of Psiloreitis. It lies farther up from the small village of Agrithia, in a captivating area. The wild vegetation makes the scenery even more beautiful, especially in Spring, when the sweet-smelling shrubs are in bloom. The architectural style of the monastery is similar to that of Vosakos. The main entrance leads to



the central yard. The entrance is vaulted and consists of a pylon with built benches, where the visitors could sit and wait for the door-keeper monk to open the gate every morning. On the lintel of the entrance one can read the name of the new founder Jeremias Sgouros and the date 1673. The monastery had been in existence many centuries before that year but the Turks had destroyed it in 1646 and it had to be reconstructed. The buildings of the monastery are arranged on different levels. The main church, the living quarters, the abbot's lodgings, the refectory and some other buildings are on the top level. On another level (to the west) are the stables, the store-rooms, the olive-press etc. It is worth having a look at the beautiful carved fountain of the monastery, dry today, to the left of the pylon. If you walk on to the left you'll see the built mangers, which are also seen at Vosakos, and a little farther are the ruins of the olive-press and the other buildings. Desolation, though, has not been able to destroy their harmony. Built with hard dark stone they make a great impression owing to the craftsmanship of the stone-cutters of the region.

To the right of the entrance spreads the large yard of the monastery. The church was built on the eastern side, though one can now see two churches on the same site. The old and the new. The old is inside the new and the new has remained unfinished since 1912! At that time it had been decided to knock the old church down and build another one, larger and nicer. Since, however, the monastery was still active, the monks resolved not to knock the old down unless the building of the new one had been completed. They began to build it. Yet, the misfortunes of the country, (Balkan wars, World War I, the 1922 disaster in Asia Minor, World War II) didn't allow the normal carrying out and the completion of the work. The building has remained unfinished, roofless, while next to it one can see the stones which were very skillfully cut to meet the needs of the building. If the church had been finished it would have been an impressive building with fine architectural features. Now the unfinished grandeur of the external part of the church hides the humbleness of the old church and the setting becomes more dramatic because of the deserted churches, the fallen





buildings and the complete abandonment of the place.

Before 1646 it had been occupied by nuns. It also owned houses in Chandax which it leased at least after the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Another convent was close to Chalepa, the **convent of Aghia Marina**. If one gets out of Chalepa and looks westwards, he'll see a small white church, some 500 meters distant. It is Aghia Marina, the main church of a centuries-old Byzantine convent. It is worth visiting it. You may find nothing reminding of its old conventional style, you will, however, see the beautiful wall paintings of Aghia Marina, with the impressive colours and you will admire the expressive style of the unknown painter of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The wall decoration was performed intermittently. On the lintel of the entrance you can see the coat-of-arms of the Kallergis family.

The older historical course of the two convents (Chalepa and Aghia Marina) is almost common. We may not know when they were founded or which was founded first. Nevertheless, we know that both of them were

convents and that they were both destroyed in 1646, when the Turks occupied the area. A poet of that time, Marinos Tzane Bounialis, describes the adventures of those convents in a dramatic manner: The Turks stripped the nuns off their clothes, laid the convents waste and destroyed the icons! One of them, Chalepa, was rebuilt (or rather it was repaired) by the Hieromonk Jeremias Sgouros, as already stated. Since then and until its dissolution it had a male community. The convent of Aghia Marina remained deserted and became subject to Chalepa.

In the course of the Turkish occupation the monastery of Chalepa faced many problems but managed to survive and offer significant assistance to the area, mainly during the national fights. In 1821 a brave monk resided there, Nestoras Kokkinithis. He was a famous rebel (chainis) with significant activity. He was aided and supported in his revolutionary activity by the other monks of Chalepa. Moustapha Pasha camped near the monastery and took action in the district of Mylopotamon. When he was informed about



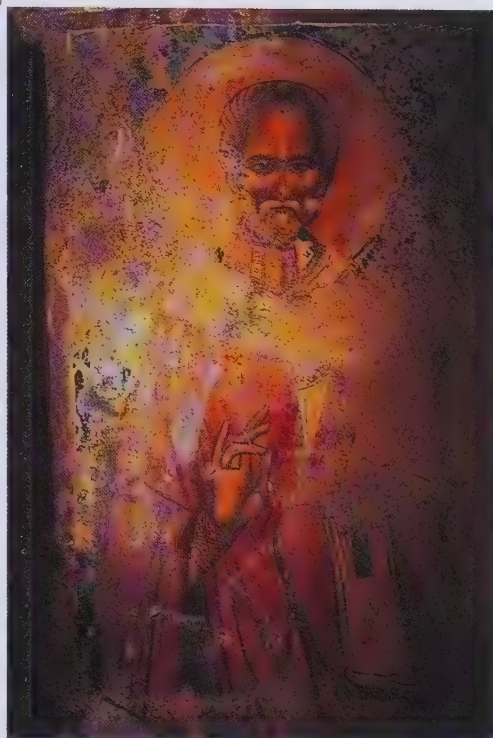
Nestoras' activities, he put a considerable price on his head. Nestoras was not intimidated, though. It is said that he managed to escape the guards of the Pasha noiselessly and appear armed in front of him, inside the tent of the Turkish Governor. It is also said that the Pasha was impressed by his renowned bravery and did not harm him, on the contrary he allowed him to carry his gun. In the 1821 revolution the Turks slaughtered a great number of monks, yet the monastery was soon rebuilt and offered significant services again, during the 1866 uprising. The English Philhellene Journalist Hillary Skinner found the monastery ruined in 1867 and, seeing its carved lintels, contemplated its former splendour. Skinner met miserable families of Cretan refugees who had taken shelter at the monastery.

The monastic history of Chalepa seems to end in the 60's, when its last abbot died.

### MONASTERY OF DISKOURI

It is situated in a picturesque area close to the village of Veni in the province of Mylopotamon. It is an old monastery, deserted and abandoned today. The building complex has been altered by unsuccessful interventions. Yet, even today, one can notice the traditional monasterial architecture according to which it was built by its founders. The facilities for the processing of the agricultural products were within the same building complex. At about the center of the yard stands the small church of Saint George. Around the church were graves of bishops in former times, unfortunately, however, they were covered by a concrete slab during the period of the monastery's "face-lifting", in the 1960's.

Saint George's icon is kept inside the church. It may not be old, still it is of special historical value. The herdsmen of the region



294. Monastery of Chalepa. The unfinished (since... 1912) church.

295. Wall painting from the church of Aghia Marina, close to Chalepa.

296. Monastery of Chalepa. View of the church.





297. The beautiful (dry today) fountain of the Monastery of Chalepa.



used to swear upon it and clear off their differences. That is to say, if a herdsman happened to lose his sheep or his goats, he asked his friends to inquire and find out the name of the thief. They usually managed to find it out after a short research. The victim would then approach the thief to tell him that he was suspected of having stolen the animals. If the suspect denied the accusation, the victim asked him to go to Saint George's church at Diskouri to clear up their difference. When they arrived there they stood before the icon of the young Saint and watched in awe the terrible scene of the dragon's killing by the saint. The offender put his palm on the icon and took a terrible oath. However, nobody dared to lie before the Saint. If he had indeed stolen the animals, he was humiliated, he confessed the stealing overwhelmed and returned the stolen animals immediately. The victim of the cattle-stealing had no more claims on the offender, the oath before the icon of the Saint was a process of reconciliation. Still, if the person under oath denied the accusation, he was no longer charged with any doubt, any suspicion. The residents of the region believed that nobody dared to take the terrible oath before the icon of the Saint falsely.

Diskouri was not the only monastery at which the herdsman cleared off their disputes. The same procedure took place at the church of Aghios Phanourios at the monastery of Valsamoneron, at the church of Saint George at Selinari and at the church of the Archangel at the village of Arathena in the province of Sfakia. The taking of an oath at Diskouri, however, has a uniqueness that brings ancient Crete closer to Crete of our days. The person who swore put his palm on Saint George's icon and said: "(Ne Za) By Zeus, I tell you and know it that I am not to blame..." The first two words derive from the doric dialect of the ancient Greek language. They are the first two words of an oath taken in the name of Zeus (Ne Za), the Greatest of Gods. Thus, it is amazing to watch the survival of the name of Zeus in the lips of the simple herdsman of Psiloreitis, for about two thousand years after the birth of Christ! Those herdsman didn't know the meaning of those one-syllable words. They had grown up in times of hard enslavement (Turkish occupation) and they



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297. The beautiful (dry today) fountain of the Monastery of Chalepa.

298, 299. In the province of Mylopotamon (close to the village of Mourtzana) lies the church of Christ, the main church of an old monastery, with impressive wall decoration.





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300. Monastery of Diskouri.

301. Icon from the Monastery of Arkathi.

302. St John's church in the village of Axos.

303. Mural painting from the church of the graveyard of Axos.

were not aware even of the name of Zeus, needless to say, they didn't know who he was and what he represented in ancient Greek religion. The shepherds of Psiloreitis simply used to hear the oath from their grandparents and they in turn from their own parents.

The connection of the area to the name of Zeus is not accidental. The celebrated ancient sanctuary, the Idaean Cave, known throughout the whole ancient world, was on Psiloreitis, and Zeus had been born there according to Greek mythology. The monastery of Diskouri had a special relation with this holy mountain, but also with Zeus' cave itself, the Idaean Cave. The summit of the mountain, just above the cave, belonged to the now deserted monastery. The monks of Diskouri were the priests of the region, since on this summit there is even today a small church dedicated to the Cross, which belonged to the monastery.

The history of the monastery is not known. It is said that an ancient sanctuary dedicated to the Dioskouri had existed on the site, though it has not been proved. The antiquity of the monastery is evidenced by the existence of a significant church, which constituted a center of worship for the monks, parallel to the church of Saint George. It is the Byzantine church of Saint John the Baptist, which lies close to the monastery. Among the frescoes the visitor can see the depiction of the patrons, those who reimbursed the expenses for the painting of the church. It is a Cretan couple of the Venetian period. The man is wearing a red garment with a white belt and black shoes, while the woman is wearing a white embroidered dress. The painters of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Crete used to paint the patrons in the churches and those depictions constitute valuable evidence about the dressing style in those old times.

The monastery flourished during the Turkish rule and aquired important handwritten books. The Cretan Code writer of the 18th century, George Gounales, may possibly have worked there on behalf of the monastery. George Gounales is known from his works preserved in the monastery of Apanosiphis (or perhaps they were written on behalf of that monastery). Its buildings were destroyed during the Turkish assault in 1646 (the monastery was probably bombarded then), during the 1821 and 1866 uprisings, as well as in the 1856 earthquake. In the 1866 revolution it was the raiding-base and the headquarters of the

revolutionary committee. The last monk of Diskouri died in 1990 and this small monastic centre of the province of Mylopotamon was deserted.

A few years later, a new monk settled there and the monastery has been revived.

**BYZANTINE MONUMENTS AT THE VILLAGE OF AXOS**

Take advantage of your visit to the area, and drive to the nearby village of Axos to see some significant Byzantine monuments of the district.

This village is one of those which have been inhabited constantly for thousands of years and in its area one can see significant monuments from both the ancient and the Byzantine period. From 535 A.D. and on it appears as a See. In the vicinity of the village there existed two early-Christian basilicas and scores of Byzantine churches. Some of them are still standing. The cruciform church of the Cross, which is in the village, makes an great impression, while the wall paintings in the church of Saint John (today the church of the cemetery) are wonderful. One can admire the depiction of the Supplication in the Sanctuary, the depiction of Saint Mamas holding an animal in his arms, as well as scenes from the Punishment of the Damned. The rest of the churches either lie in ruins (Aghia Pakou, that is, Aghia Ypakoe = Submission) or have been restored. A very beautiful church, though ruined, is to be seen at the central square of the village, above the beautiful fountain.























NIKOS PSILAKIS

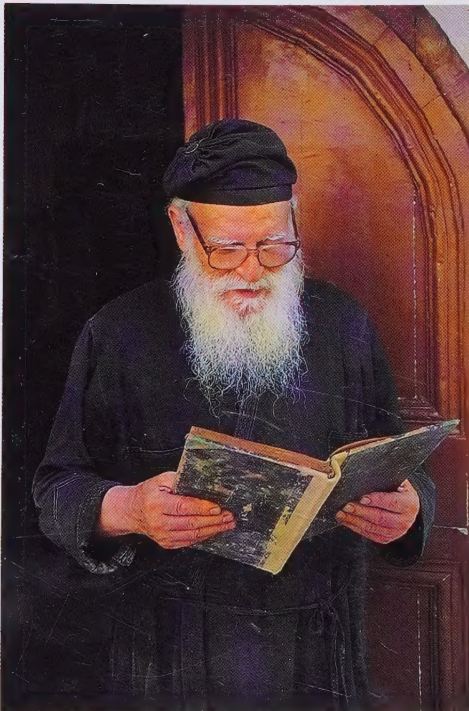
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